

ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories
presented by
the master
of **SUSPENSE**

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May 1966

Dear Reader:

If May is the harbinger of romance, what is there for the matured romanticist? Let one who knows enlighten you: a comfortable chair and this magazine, of course, but prior to that, try a covey of Cornish hens just off the barbecue grill, accompanied by delicious wild rice, and a tossed salad. This prelude will set the stage for any mystery reader.

Not too many years ago mystery stories, and those who read them, were considered gauche. Husbands who helped the little woman in the kitchen were called bon vivants, in lieu of a stronger term often used, but times, conditions, and conventions change. Yesterday's jet set is today's restless set with a special car (patterned after those of the 30's, but with bucket seats) in every garage; a barbecue grill in every patio; and a good mystery magazine on every coffee table.

So join the club; be IN. Never mind the special car, there's always the bus. Nurture the last two avocations . . . be King of the Grill, and a Mystery Reading Buff, and acquire the resolute expression of the gentleman on the cover.

Alfred Hitchcock

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 11, No. 5, May 1966. Single copies 50 cents, and Possessions; elsewhere \$7.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H. © 1966 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of addresses should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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The reader will, I believe, endorse the author's evaluation of the following which he has obligingly submitted, to wit: "The rose was artificial, but the girl was very real."



CAPTAIN LEOPOLD was staring out of his office window, watching the haphazard assortment of cars in the police parking lot behind the building. "Know what I'm thinking, Fletcher?" he asked over his shoulder.

"That the window needs washing?" Sergeant Fletcher replied without looking up from the afternoon newspaper.

"That, too. But I was thinking about all those cars, and all the people who drive them. I was thinking that man isn't an individual any more when he crowds into parking lots and fills the highways with these iron monsters, so identical except for their color."

Fletcher came over to stand beside him. "So what? I suppose cowboys' horses were pretty identical, too, except for their color."

"That was different, though, Fletcher. The horse. . . ."

"Never mind now, Captain," Fletcher said with a smile. "There she is, waiting for you."

Leopold followed his gaze until he picked out the familiar red rose topping the antenna of a low-



slung French sports car. He hated to admit, even to himself, that he'd been watching for her. He was too old to admit anything.

"Take care of things, Fletcher. I'll see you in the morning."

"Right, Captain." Fletcher smiled and went back to his newspaper.

The rose was artificial, but the girl was very real. Her name was Nina Blake, and Leopold had known her for three years. She was a straight-haired blonde with long legs and an exceptional smile, a girl everyone liked and everyone remembered. He'd met her during tragic days, while investigating the killing of her father. The case had never been solved, but later, after time had begun to heal the sores of grief, they'd grown into casual acquaintances, then close friends, and now perhaps something more. Leopold's marriage had not worked out and, at forty-four, he was beginning to consider himself a lonely, middle-aged man with nothing to string the days together but the cynical demands of his job.

Nina Blake was still under thirty, and she bore her father's proud name well. Hamilton Blake had been a world-famous author and something of an inspirational philosopher. He had written a newspaper column and annual best-selling books on the value of hope as a virtue. If his readers were

mainly the elderly and the infirm, they still took heart from his regular messages. Some said he hadn't an enemy in the world, but he'd found one that night someone hurled him from the window of his tenth floor apartment. The police theory was that he'd returned home to discover a sneak thief at work, but the disorder of the apartment had an almost studied plan about it that had always bothered Leopold. His friendship with the dead man's daughter had begun originally as an attempt to enter her circle of friends, to find, perhaps, some person who might have reason to kill a man who had no enemies. But gradually the file on Hamilton Blake had sifted deeper into the unsolved file, and Leopold found that he enjoyed Nina's company for other reasons.

"Busy day?" she greeted him, kicking open the door on his side with one long leg. She was wearing a bathing suit under her beach jacket, and her body was tanned a deep golden color that contrasted nicely with the light blonde of her hair. "Climb in."

"I will, thanks. Still enjoying your vacation?"

She shifted gears and eased the little sports car into the flow of rush hour traffic. "This is the last of it. Frank called and wants me to go in to work tomorrow."

"Oh?" Leopold's knees were cramped in the little car, but he never complained.

"Lots of orders to be shipped with the Fourth of July coming up. More than he expected." Nina Blake was secretary to the president of the Patriot Fireworks Company, a firm that had never ceased to fascinate Leopold.

"Still, you should get your full vacation."

"No hurry. I can take it later. I have to stop and see Frank for a minute now, about an order. Then I'll change and we can go to dinner. All right?"

"Fine." He rested his hands on his cramped knees, studying a tiny wart he hadn't noticed before.

By the time they reached the office and warehouse of Patriot Fireworks, the homebound rush had begun to thin out. Nina whisked the little car under a massive overhead door and came to a stop at the loading dock at the rear of the building. "I'll only be a few minutes," she said; then added with a smile, "Get out and stretch your legs."

Leopold went up the steps to the loading dock and through the little door to the shipping room. Nothing could be sent by mail, and the protected cartons that awaited the following morning's trucks bore such intriguing mark-

ings as *Golden Wheel*, *Butterfly*, and *Grand Finale Aerial*. Mostly they were bound for ball parks or amusement parks or suburban shopping centers in the northeast, where customers would be lured to weekend events by the promise of noise and spectacle.

Nina returned in a moment, tanned legs flashing beneath her beach coat. Frank Oates followed her, looking tired and just a little bit disappointed to see Leopold. "Hello, Captain. How's the crime rate these days?"

"Growing." Leopold didn't dislike the man, but he felt a little sorry for him. The fireworks business seemed to be Frank Oates' only claim to an exciting life. Nina Blake had worked for him nearly five years, ever since she came back from Manhattan after a disillusioning try at modeling.

"I guess the hot weather is good for both our businesses," Oates said with a chuckle. "Have a good time, you two."

Leopold nodded and mumbled something under his breath. He resented the fatherly attitude from someone so close to his own age. After all, he wasn't really going out on a date with Nina. Or was he?

They dined that night in a little place down by the water, watching the long inboards with their

sleek lines and shining decks. Summer had come once more to the north shore of the Sound, and Leopold was enjoying it.

"Happy?" Nina asked.

"Why shouldn't I be? You make a man feel young again."

She squeezed his hand across the table and then reached for her purse. "I hate even to bring this up, because it's too much like business."

"What's that?"

"About my father, but it's always been there, hasn't it? Between us? In the beginning I thought that was the only reason you saw so much of me."

"Your father's murder was a shocking crime. I don't think we should ever let the case rest."

She nodded, but it seemed to bother her. "Three years is a long time. Do you think the killer is still around?"

Leopold shrugged. "Some people think it was a sneak thief. If so, he'd have been far away within twenty-four hours. I had other ideas, as you know."

"I know. You thought it was one of his friends, someone he knew."

"There was no sign of the door being forced, and the ransacking of the apartment had a phoney look to it."

"He didn't have an enemy in

the whole wide world," Nina said.

"I've heard that before. None of us have enemies, only rivals." He glanced down at her purse. "What was it you started to show me?"

"A letter. It came yesterday. Remember a man named Sam Xavier?"

"I remember him," Leopold said, a bit distastefully. Sam Xavier had been a sports writer on the local newspaper until he was fired during a scandal over bribery of college basketball players. He'd drifted into fight promotion, but only a few days earlier Leopold had heard he'd lost his license. "He's not doing so well these days."

"I think he wants money from me. Read this."

Leopold took the letter and scanned it. "*Dear Miss Blake: I know who killed your father, and I have a letter in my possession that will prove it. All yours for five thousand dollars. Let's talk about it. Friday at your office. After hours—say nine o'clock. Regards, Sam Xavier.*"

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's a shakedown. He's out of work and needs the cash. I wouldn't trust Sam Xavier any farther than I could throw him." Leopold resented the letter. He'd worked on the case too long to be cheated out of a solution by some two-bit

con man looking for easy money.

"He might know something," she said. "It wouldn't do any harm to talk with him."

"He was around that night," Leopold admitted. "I remember him being with the reporters covering the case."

"Tomorrow's Friday. I should see him."

He sighed and reached for her hand. "Let me do some checking tomorrow. I'll phone you. You're working all day?"

She nodded. "Frank's half out of his mind."

Leopold signaled for the check. "Why do you stay there? You could live off your father's royalties."

"Too much ambition, I guess. I have to be doing something."

"I don't like Frank Oates."

She smiled then, showing a youthful dimple. "You don't like any men who make a pass at me."

"Oates made a pass? That creep?"

"So? There are worse creeps."

"Now you're kidding me. Come on."

They drove for a long time, following the curve of the Sound, watching the darkness sweep over the water from the east, seeing the tiny colored dots that were the running lights of the boats.

"Have you spent much time on

the water?" she asked him once.

"I once caught a murderer out there," he told her.

"How romantic!"

"My life never had much romance in it."

They were in her car because she liked to drive with the top down in the summer. She switched on the radio and found some quiet music. "Tell me about your wife," she said.

"I'd rather not."

The music faded and sputtered. "I'll have to get this radio fixed. It doesn't have the power any more."

"Never mind," he said. He reached over and switched it off.

"Look! Fireworks!"

They were straight ahead, far in the distance, adding a spark of something to the mood of the night.

"No great thrill for you."

"They're always a thrill for me. Everything is." She was silent for a time, then she said, "That letter from Sam Xavier—it makes me feel like I'm on the verge of some great discovery."

"Don't get your hopes up."

"But I have to. Don't you see?"

"Does it matter so much, now, who killed your father?"

"He was a great man and people loved him, people he'd never met but who read his column and

books. Of course it matters." She turned to look at him. "It matters to you, doesn't it?"

"It matters to me for a different reason I'm a detective."

Overhead, the stars were beginning to come out.

In the morning Leopold went down to the newspaper and asked for a man named Jimmy McDonald. Three years ago, on the night Hamilton Blake was killed, Jimmy McDonald had been assigned to the city desk. He'd gone to Hamilton Blake's apartment for an interview, and had been the first one on the scene. Jimmy was a short, friendly man with thinning brown hair. Leopold had always liked him.

"Remember the night Hamilton Blake was killed?" Leopold asked him over coffee.

"Sure I remember."

"You went up to his apartment, just after it happened. Was Sam Xavier around?"

"Sam? Sure, he was around. He was always around, those days."

Leopold sipped his coffee. It was too hot and too bitter. "Do you remember anything unusual about Sam that night?"

"No."

"He didn't say anything to you?"

Jimmy McDonald thought about

it a moment. "Nothing special."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"Not for a month. The state took away his license to promote fights. I hear he's strapped financially."

Leopold nodded. "If you think of anything, anything about that night, call me."

The short man gave him an odd look, out of the corner of his eyes. "Sure, Captain."

Leopold went back to his office, feeling uneasy. He telephoned Sam Xavier's apartment, but got no answer. The address was near the Patriot Fireworks Company, which explained why he'd suggested meeting Nina at her office. He'd be coming from the apartment with his mysterious letter.

Leopold paced his office for an hour, growled at Fletcher when he poked his head in, and finally went off to the basement files to dig out the reports on Hamilton Blake's murder. Reading them was something like going over an old school book, or a forgotten photo album. There was Nina, the first time he'd met her, and the reporters, and Hamilton Blake's body crushed into the pavement.

He flipped through the typewritten pages, occasionally smiling at some patrolman's half-literate descriptions. Then he paused at a familiar name—Bob Dante. He'd

been engaged to Nina at the time of her father's death. Leopold made a note to look up Mr. Dante. The case was coming to life again, thanks to Sam Xavier.

Nina was waiting for Leopold in the parking lot at five, the rose on her antenna poking up from the midst of the cars like a beacon for lost travelers. "Hello," he said. "I'm afraid we'd better skip dinner tonight. I'm working on something."

"Oh?"

"Your father's case again. I've been talking to people."

"If I pay Xavier the money, maybe we'll have the answer."

"I don't want you to pay him. I don't even want you to meet him. I'll be there at nine to talk to him. You stay away."

"But . . ."

"Promise?"

"All right."

"I'll phone you as soon as it's over. I don't want you playing games with Sam Xavier."

"I can take care of myself." She flipped open the glove compartment to show him the little automatic he'd brought her last Christmas. "Remember this?"

"Stay away from there!"

"All right," she repeated. "But call me."

Leopold watched her drive away. Then he went inside and tried to

phone Xavier again. There was still no answer. He smoked a cigarette down to the filter and then went out for a quick sandwich.

At seven-thirty he began to grow impatient. He looked up Bob Dante's address in the phone book and discovered he lived in the suburbs. It was too far to drive and be back by nine. Finally, Leopold went back to the office and looked through some of the day's routine that he had neglected. He phoned Nina at her place and was annoyed and a bit disturbed when she failed to answer.

At eight-thirty he went back to his car and headed toward the Patriot Fireworks Company. The sun was still visible, low in the western sky, and the heat of the day still clung to the streets. He did not drive fast, not wanting to get there much before nine. By the time he turned down the street, dusk was beginning to cloud the brightness of the evening. He saw the familiar building, and saw the unfamiliar car parked in front. It didn't belong to Frank Oates or Nina, and he was sure none of the employees would be working this late on a weekend. Sam Xavier had arrived early.

There was a glow, a sputtering, from the shipping room. Leopold knew in an instant what it was. He flicked on his two-way radio.

"This is Captain Leopold, reporting a fire at the Patriot Fireworks Company. Send all emergency vehicles. Also contact Sergeant Fletcher and the arson squad. Hurry!"

Then he was out of the car and running. He'd reached the loading dock before the first awful blast sent rockets and sparklers buzzing about his head. He grabbed an extinguisher from the platform and played it on the worst of the flames, hoping they hadn't got too much of a start.

He edged into the shipping room, and saw at once the crumpled body on the floor. He made for it, stamping out the licking flames. The deafening roar of a

box of giant firecrackers shook the building as he turned over the body and looked into the staring dead eyes of Sam Xavier.

In the distance he could already hear the sirens, but a glance at the advancing flames told him they'd be too late to save any evidence. He dropped the fire extinguisher and lifted Xavier's body to his shoulders.

By the time he'd reached the street with his burden, the rubber-clad firemen were already turning their hoses on the building. He laid Xavier's body carefully on the grass, and then dropped next to it to still the throbbing of his over-worked heart.

From somewhere Fletcher came



on the run. "What happened?" he asked.

"Sam Xavier. Somebody pumped a few bullets into him, and then set fire to the place to cover the traces. See if you can find anything around the loading docks before the firemen tramp it up too much."

Leopold fumbled for a cigarette and watched Fletcher run off toward the building, his slim figure outlined by the orange smoke and frequent showers of sparks. The grass was damp beneath him, and presently he stood up. He patted Sam Xavier's pockets gently in preliminary examination, wondering about the letter. But if he'd had it with him, it seemed to be gone now.

The fire chief came over, and Leopold gave his report. Then he saw Fletcher coming back, a troubled expression on his face.

"Looks like the fire's under control," Leopold said. "They saved the main building. Find anything?"

Fletcher looked grim. "Just this." He opened his hand and held out a smudged artificial rose, like the one from the antenna of Nina's car.

Leopold didn't phone Nina that night. The hours until dawn were mainly filled with reports and the beginnings of a hundred threads of investigation. Even in the morn-

ing, after a few hours' restless sleep, he could only phone her a few reassuring words.

"You've heard about it?"

"Of course. I wondered why you didn't call."

He sighed into the telephone and asked his question. "Nina, you weren't there last night, were you?"

"No."

"All right."

"You told me not to go. You believe me, don't you?"

"I believe you. Look, I'm sending Fletcher down for you. We'll need to ask you some questions."

"I can come by myself."

"He has to look at your car. It's just routine."

"All right," she said finally.

"Nina . . ."

"What?"

"He was killed with a .25 pistol—like the one in your glove compartment."

"I told you I wasn't there."

"I'll see you soon," he said, and hung up.

In a little while Fletcher came in, looking tired. He'd been with the lab people since eight o'clock. "They're working on it," he said. "Just another case to them."

"What about the rose?" Leopold managed to ask.

"The spots were rust. They match the rust on the bottom of

the corrugated door. She drove under it, and the flower got knocked off."

Leopold shook his head. "That's a loading dock. There has to be enough leeway for trucks to get in."

"It was half closed during the fire."

"Look, go out and pick-up Nina. You can check the car while you're there. And bring in the gun from the glove compartment."

Fletcher looked away. "Are we arresting her?"

"Of course not! It's just routine. Remember, she's the reason Xavier was there."

Fletcher shuffled his feet like a small boy. "Captain . . ."

"No comments. Not this morning. Just pick her up."

"All right." At the door he paused. "Frank Oates is outside. Want to see him now?"

"Yes. Send him in."

Oates was far from happy. His face seemed locked into a frown that didn't relax when he saw Leopold. "Were you responsible for what happened last night?" he asked. "My business half ruined at the peak of the season!"

"I wasn't responsible," Leopold told him. "I discovered the fire and turned in the alarm. The whole place could have gone up; the whole neighborhood."

"Why would anybody do it to me?"

"It was done to Sam Xavier. To try and cover up the murder."

"Who killed him?"

"We don't know, Mr. Oates."

"But you'll find out?"

"We'll find out. You're insured, aren't you?"

"You know how high the rates are for my business? I can barely afford to insure the building."

"I want to ask you a few questions about that building," Leopold said. "How could Xavier have gotten in?"

Oates shrugged. "Somebody let him in. The alarm would have rung if he broke in."

"How about the shipping room door?"

"The big overhead door? That would be partly open. We roll it down about halfway at four-thirty, but it doesn't get locked until the watchman checks the place at eleven."

"Why is that?"

"We close it halfway so trucks can't get in to make deliveries or pickups. The shipping room people go home at four-thirty. But we leave it open enough for cars to get under. I often park in there when I'm working nights."

"Were you working last night?"

"No. Nina had told me she might come down."

"So the overhead door was open halfway? Where was this watchman?"

"It's a private patrol, actually. He makes his first check around eleven."

"To your knowledge, no one was in the building shortly before nine?"

"Not unless it was Nina."

Leopold didn't like that answer, but he was stuck with it. "What about Sam Xavier? Did you know him?"

"Not really. He bought some fireworks from me once, when he was promoting an outdoor fight at a shopping center."

"Had you heard from him lately?"

"He phoned once while Nina was on vacation, looking for her."

"Oh? Did he say what he wanted?"

"No."

"You weren't curious?"

Oates shrugged and almost leered. "I figured he was a boyfriend."

Leopold might have reached across the desk and punched him then, but he'd learned long ago to control his emotions. The thing was difficult enough already, without giving Frank Oates reason to gloat.

"All right," he told the man. "Just one more thing—where were

you between eight and nine last night?"

"If you think I tried to burn down my own place . . ."

"Where were you?"

"At home. Alone. The neighbors might have seen me working around the yard. I don't know."

Leopold got to his feet. "Thank you for coming down. I may have more questions later."

Frank Oates mumbled something and went out. Leopold stood staring at the door for a moment and then went over to the window. He knew he was waiting for Fletcher to return with Nina, but he couldn't really admit it. Instead he simply stared down at the parking lot and wondered what the temperature was.

"Yes, that's the flower from my antenna," Nina said quietly. "I noticed it was missing."

Leopold asked, "Where did you lose it?"

"I don't know."

He frowned and tried shuffling some papers. It was difficult, the most difficult interrogation he'd ever conducted. She was more than just a person to him, and he'd never realized it so much as in that moment. He knew he should have turned the questioning over to Fletcher or one of the others, but that would have been an admis-

sion that she was a suspect, something he was not yet prepared to do.

"Sergeant Fletcher says the gun is missing from your glove compartment. What about that?"

"I don't know."

He sighed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "Nina, Nina! Talk to me! Were you there last night?"

"I already told you I wasn't."

"And I believe you! But somebody met him there, and killed him." He leaned back for a moment in silence. "I think it was the same person who killed your father three years ago. Don't you want to help find him?"

"Of course I do! You know that."

"You loved your father very much, didn't you?"

She nodded, and there was a hint of tears at the memory. "He was a great man. He inspired so many people."

Leopold nodded. "That's why I know you'd never have killed Sam Xavier to protect your father's murderer. But somebody did, and no doubt destroyed that letter Xavier mentioned."

He pondered it a while longer and finally sent her home. He was not yet ready to face the problems of her rose and the missing gun. Someone had been there before the

scheduled nine o'clock meeting. Someone who . . .

He started pacing the office, his mind not quite over the edge of a half-formed idea. "Fletcher, come in here."

The sergeant glanced at the empty chair. "You sent her home?"

"Of course. What else could I do?"

"Captain, if we find that gun and it's hers . . ."

"It won't be." But he remembered too well that the gun had been in her glove compartment the previous afternoon. Something had happened to it. "Don't you approve of the way I'm handling the case?"

"You should take yourself off it, Captain. I say that as a friend."

Leopold rubbed a hand over his eyes. "Look, I didn't call you in here for that sort of advice."

"I'm sorry."

"There's something on the verge of my mind, and I want to talk it out. Will you listen?" Fletcher nodded and settled into the chair still warm with Nina's presence. Leopold hurried on. "Xavier's appointment with Nina was for nine o'clock, but he must have gotten there about eight-thirty. Now assuming that he told no one else of the meeting, we have a somewhat fantastic coincidence. He arrived early, and the very person he

feared, apparently the killer of Hamilton Blake, also arrived at that time."

But Fletcher was shaking his head. "No coincidence. Somebody could have followed him there, some gambler with a long memory."

"I don't think so, Fletcher. The crime was a spur-of-the-moment thing. A small-caliber gun, the fire afterwards—that's not a gang killing. We have a motive and it's a darn good one. Xavier's luck turned bad and he needed some cash, so he dug out this old letter about Hamilton Blake's killing. He wrote to Nina and maybe to the killer as well . . . Sure, that's it. He set up an appointment with the killer for eight-thirty, hoping for a double bag of blackmail. He'd sell the letter to the killer at eight-thirty, and then to Nina at nine."

"Who?" Fletcher asked.

Leopold shrugged. "Maybe Frank Oates. It was his place." "You think he'd try to burn down his own factory?"

"He would, to cover a murder."

"Maybe," Fletcher conceded, "but I'll still look for the gun."

Leopold fingered the rose on his desk, looking again at the tiny fleck of rust. "Did you ever know there used to be a god of rust, Fletcher? They called him Robi-

gus, and people worshipped him, a long time ago."

"That overhead door was half-way down, Captain."

"But I drove under it the night before in her car, and the flower cleared it. She wasn't there, Fletcher."

"All right," he said, but Leopold could see he wasn't satisfied. At the door he turned and said, "I almost forgot, Captain. That reporter, Jimmy McDonald, phoned. He wants to see you. Says it's important."

"Thanks, Fletcher. Keep at it."

Leopold thought of phoning the newspaper, but then decided he needed some fresh air. He walked over to the familiar editorial rooms and sought out the little reporter. The place was a bustle of approaching deadline, and he had to wait while McDonald finished taking down a story over the phone.

Finally the man put down his pencil and came over. "Want to go up for more coffee, Captain?"

"You've got something for me?"

"I've got something."

Over the coffee he told Leopold what it was. "Now that Sam Xavier's dead, I guess I can tell you. Maybe, somehow, it'll help you find that guy who killed him. Anyway, that night old Blake was killed, when I got to his apart-

ment, Xavier was already there."

Leopold sipped his coffee, feeling the edge of the fiber cup against his lips. "You think he killed Blake?"

"No, nothing like that; but he asked me to say that I was the first one on the scene, so I did. The place was a mess and we didn't touch anything, but later I got the impression that Sam might have found something, some sort of clue to the killer's identity."

"Did he ever say that?"

Jimmy McDonald looked uncomfortable. "Once. Once, after a few drinks, he told me he had a letter. He called it his unemployment insurance. He said he could get a lot of money for it."

"Did he ever say who the killer was?" Leopold asked, holding his breath.

McDonald frowned. "Not really. I asked him that same night, and he said the killer was a poet. I think he said a religious poet. He was drunk and he didn't mean it literally. I think he was referring to the killer's name."

Leopold said nothing, but behind his veiled eyes he was thinking it was about time he had a talk with Bob Dante. After leaving McDonald, he stopped in a phone booth and called Fletcher. "Anything new?"

"I've been trying to reach you,

Captain. We've found the gun."
"Where?"

"In a sewer a block away from the murder scene. It's Nina Blake's, and it's been fired recently. Ballistics is working on it now, but I'm sure it's the weapon."

"All right, I'll check in later."

"Captain, should I pick her up?"

"No."

"They'll have your neck upstairs."

"It's my neck, Fletcher." He hung up and went back to the car. On the western horizon, storm clouds were beginning to gather over the trees.

Bob Dante lived with his wife and new baby in a quiet suburban area. The back yard of his home sloped gently toward the distant bay, and when Leopold found him he was on his knees among the roses at the end of the yard. In the distance, on the deep blue water, a score of pleasure boats shifted positions like tiny chess pieces seen from afar.

"I didn't know you were a gardener," Leopold said.

"Oh?" Dante got to his feet, slim and handsome and very confident. "Captain Leopold, isn't it? You worked on the Blake case."

"That's right; and now I'm working on the killing of Sam Xavier. You may have read about it in the morning papers."

Bob Dante nodded. "I used to see him around town." He motioned out toward the bay. "Looks like we might be in for a storm. They always seem to come on weekends during the summer."

"You've got quite a view here, and a nice garden."

"Thanks."

Leopold took out his cigarettes. "Ever see Nina Blake any more?"

"I'm married and a father now. I haven't seen Nina in a couple of years."

"You liked her, didn't you?"

Bob Dante looked up from his roses. "You might say that. I was engaged to marry her."

"Why did you break it off?"

"She broke it, not I. I don't know; personality differences, I suppose, or maybe she just didn't like being married to a struggling young lawyer."

"You knew her father?" Leopold asked, his memory vague.

"Hamilton Blake was one of the finest men who ever lived. I don't think the world will ever really know how many millions of people found the will to go on—*to hope*—after reading his books and columns. He was a close friend of mine, and he introduced me to his daughter."

"I remember now. You handled some of his legal business."

Bob Dante nodded. "I drew up

his last will for him, leaving his money to Nina and certain charities. Perhaps you don't know just how brave Hamilton Blake was. He was in constant pain during those last months of his life." He almost smiled at Leopold's sudden frown. "I suppose you came to question me, to consider me a suspect again, but you see, Captain Leopold, I am the one person in the world who wouldn't have killed Hamilton Blake. I am the one person to whom he confided that he had only a few months left to live."

Leopold turned his eyes toward the sky. "It's starting to rain," he said quietly.

The rain stopped, just at sundown.

"You look tired," she said.

"I am tired. It's been a long day."

"Do you have the killer yet?"

"I have the killer," he said, not looking at her.

"Who?"

"You, Nina. You killed Sam Xavier."

"You think so?"

Leopold felt a grinding pain between his eyes. "I know so, Nina. You phoned him and moved the appointment up a half-hour, so you could see him before I arrived. When he showed you the letter,

you shot him and destroyed it, and then set fire to the place. It's your gun that killed him, and the rose was from your antenna. That rose fooled me for a while, because we drove under the door without hitting it the previous night. But then I remembered the poor reception on your radio. You raised the antenna, didn't you, and knocked the rose off it when you drove under the door to meet Xavier?"

"Why would I kill him? To protect my father's murderer?"

"Yes."

"That's insane!"

He was staring out the window at the wet streets, trying to see as far away as yesterday. "I'll see that you get a good lawyer," he told her.

"I had no reason to kill him!"

"You had the best reason in the world. Sam Xavier was the first one into your father's apartment that night. What he found wouldn't be good for future blackmail, so he wrecked the apartment, to make it look like a struggle. He had only a few minutes before

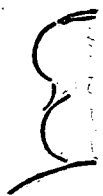
Jimmy McDonald arrived, and the job he did was a bit too phony, but it fooled most people. Now, three years later, he produced the letter and came to you for money—not to reveal the killer's name, but to hide it. Xavier said one night after a few drinks that the killer was a religious poet. He wasn't referring to the Italian poet Dante, but to the English poet Blake."

"You think I killed my father?"

He could almost see it now, as darkness settled slowly over the city. A girl with long golden legs and a smile just for him, waiting in that car with the funny rose on its antenna. "Of course not," he said. "But what kind of letter would Xavier be most likely to find at a death scene? What would we have thought if he hadn't messed up the apartment? Your father was in pain, and all the hope he'd given others wasn't enough to sustain him. You killed Sam Xavier to protect your father's memory—so nobody would ever know that Hamilton Blake committed suicide."

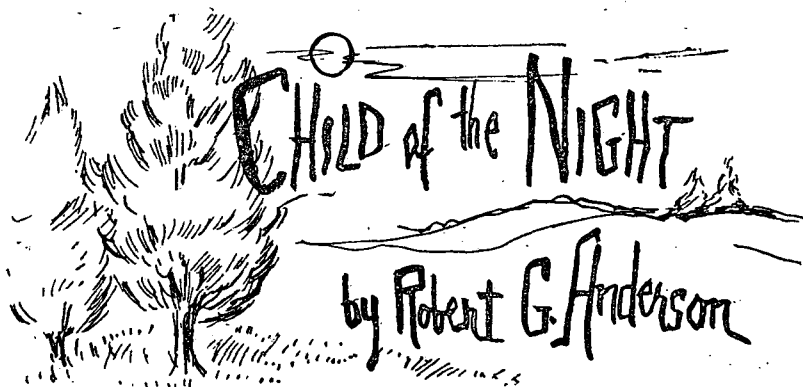


*Some people accredit, "Fate thy measure takes," yet others avow
that human hands wield the yardstick.*



ARDIS MILLARD came to the brow of the lake bluff and watched the way the moonlight lay on the roof of her home halfway down the slope. She paused before starting on the downward path which led

the clusters of sumac and tough juniper would appear ominous, but Ardis was a child of the night. She was in her element, moving easily through the quiet night of midsummer. Besides the extensive



along the edge of Linden Park. Ardis did not know what she would tell her mother, but she just could not have endured another minute of the dull, stupid weekend at Lisa Hurst's. It had been a long walk from the bus station, and she decided to stop at the spring. It was late, but her mother did not expect her home until tomorrow, anyway.

To some, the shadows beneath

grounds of her own home, she knew every tree and path in the adjacent park and every pebble and grassy tuft along the beach which stretched away to the north and south. With her father, but more often in nocturnal jaunts alone, she had been exploring them for a good two-thirds of her eighteen years.

An owl swooped down silently and pinned a luckless mouse on



the pathway before her. One small squeak, and the owl disappeared among the trees. Ardis' eyes gleamed.

The spring was lovely in the moonlight despite its circle of ever-encroaching weeds and underbrush. Ardis loved it. Not many people stopped here anymore. A new road had been cut around the shoulder of the bluff and the people of Newcomb preferred the broader and more gradual climb from the lake to the village. Ardis knelt beside the steep, overgrown path and gazed at her dim reflection in the spring, the dark velvet bloom of sumac hanging over her head. She drank.

Refreshed, she rose and listened as the night came alive with small mysterious sounds. She left the park and entered the well-kept Millard grounds which sloped down the bluff. Set in a level area which looked as if it had been formed by the pressure of a giant thumb, the large, rambling house slept with one eye open, its spacious lawn and well-tended shrubs falling gently away toward the lake. That eye shone unblinkingly from a room in the north wing of the otherwise darkened house. On impulse, Ardis took the garden walk which wound around the house and ended at the rear of the lighted room. She reached the end of

the walk, parted the branches of a mock-orange bush, and peered through the French doors at the scene being enacted there.

Her mother and a man, somewhere in his late thirties, were engaged in tense conversation. Smooth, possessed of dark good looks, his name was Tony Riffali and Ardis knew him from seeing him briefly at her mother's parties. What was he doing here?

"Come on, Lillian, stop sparring," the man said. "I've got the letters in a safe place."

There was a stricken look on Lillian Millard's face. She made a gesture as if to reach out imploringly toward Tony, then let her arm fall.

"So it's blackmail. I was a fool not to realize where this would lead."

"Don't use that word. You wanted to play along. You were chiseling on your husband, you know. You're not so innocent."

"And I listened to all your sweet talk, taken in like a schoolgirl."

"All right, all right—skip it. I haven't got all night. I'll put it in words of one syllable. It's finished now, and I want that five thousand dollars."

"Where do you think I can raise that kind of money?"

"Shut up! Five thousand in nice small unsuspecting bills. You can

raise it. You have valuable jewelry, and a personal bank account."

"You're taking a lot for granted."

"Listen, Walter is rich and he's a big protective dope where you're concerned. He wouldn't check too closely even if you did sell something or cashed some bonds."

"And if I don't?"

"You'll regret it. Like I said, I have the letters, and a few pictures Walter would be interested in. And that daughter of yours—weren't you planning to send her east to college this fall?"

"You miserable skunk! How could I ever have imagined I was in love with you? Keep Walter and Ardis out of this."

"Have it your way. This is Saturday. I'll give you a week. I don't care where you get it, but I want the money. You'd better get going on it before your precious Walter gets back from his business trip."

"Get out! This room needs airing."

"Remember! One week—that's all."

"Just go." The woman shuddered. She seemed to shrink where she stood.

Tony left, and minutes later his convertible purred down the drive, the taillights winking redly against the dark trees. The girl in the garden watched her mother slump against the door, then she backed

away and ran headlong down the path toward the shore.

She could not face her mother now, not when both their minds were in such a state. Ardis had never suspected. So that was how Lillian had spent her time when she had phoned and said she was at the Kennicotts', or the Osmuns', sometimes overnight.

Ardis had never dreamed—although her father had told her once, half in jest, "You know, Ardis, you and I have to look after your mother, she's so impractical, so helpless and vulnerable, but I guess that's part of her charm. We both love her very much, don't we? She'll never be the tough realists we are." And his love for his wife had shown in his eyes as he said it. Yes, they both loved Lillian with a fierce love, knowing her faults, but determined to protect her.

Once she had reached the smooth wet sand at the water's edge, Ardis headed for the dark bulk of the old park pier several hundred feet up the beach from the Millard property. Across the end of the pier a venerable wooden beam, bolted to the piling, provided a convenient catwalk, a place for her to discard her simple shift, sandals, and underthings.

Naked, with only the moon as spectator, Ardis slipped into the

water. Her mind seethed with what she had overheard. She tried to relax, her body moving through the water like an arrowed fish, but the impact of the conversation she had just overheard sent her mind racing.

That devil, Tony. He and his oily politeness; now it was out—his true, nasty nature. Blackmail! How could she help her mother?

Ardis turned, causing the water to boil around her. She thought of the Loch Ness monster, irrelevantly, and how some such creature might lurk in this lake. Here in the depths, perhaps it was watching her now from its place of concealment in the ooze, its scaly-lidded eyes bright, waiting to reach up and pull her flailing body under the surface. With the turmoil boiling in her mind, she half-wished it would; then she would be spared this awful dilemma.

But her thoughts turned once more to her mother's plight. She thought of what her father would do and how he would react if he found out about Tony Riffali. He must never find out! It would destroy him, she knew. He was fine and clean, and if he ever knew it would ruin the close comradeship he shared with her and mother—a comradeship which was evident every time he could spare a few hours away from the press of busi-

ness and its demanding travel.

Once more Ardis forced her mind back to cope with the present and its realities. She lay on her back and stared up into the sky with solemn face, keeping afloat with slow undulating movements of her hands. Her lips formed a silent, earnest vow to the moon and to all things of the night that she would never, never allow anyone to destroy the fine but tenuous thread which bound her, her mother, and her father.

She swam back to the pier and lifted herself out of the water with one supple thrust. She stood on the catwalk, flinging showers of droplets as she shook out her long hair. The freshening wind fingered the leaves of the dark row of lombardy poplars along the shore.

Ardis dressed quickly and made her way back to the beach over the tops of the boulders. Now she felt she could face her mother and explain why she returned a day early—and still not betray her feelings.

Since one of Tony Riffali's favorite pastimes was sunbathing, he could usually be found in swim suit, sunglasses and old white sailor hat, spending part of every sunny day on Linden Park Beach, lounging in a deck chair. Or he would "borrow" the use of a row-

boat and row slowly in lazy circles out beyond the buoys. On the Tuesday following his showdown with Lillian Millard, he was out rowing and noted the beach was not crowded, only a few swimmers in the water. But one was quite far out, beyond the ropes, a girl in a black suit and white bathing cap. Tony rowed near as she seemed to be in trouble, fighting the water. She hailed him.

"Please—let me hang on to your boat. I—didn't realize—I'd gone—so far—out." She was winded.

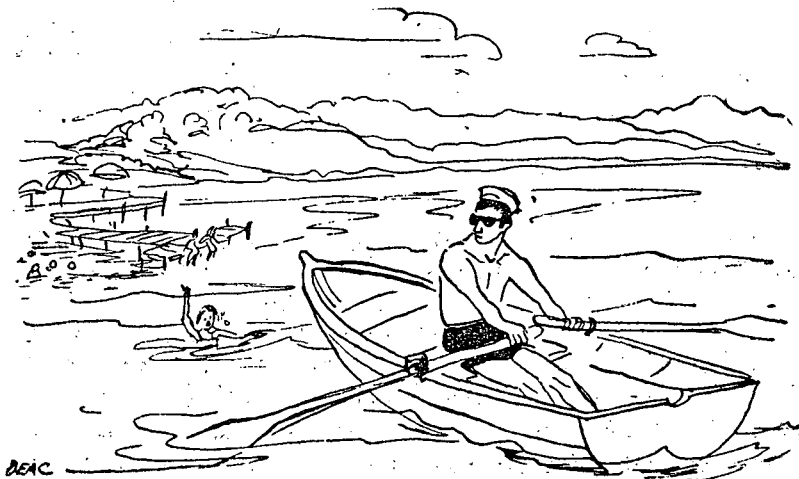
It was Ardis Millard, Lillian's daughter!

"Sure," Tony swung the light craft around. "Hang on and I'll pull you in to where you can stand."

"Thanks. I'm not in any real danger though, just a little tired. But it's lucky that you came along—Tony."

Oh, she knew him. Not that it was a surprise, but he had only encountered her briefly at the Millard home, then she had darted away into the night, elusive as smoke. "A child of the night," Lillian had said. A strange one, surely! And with a compelling beauty, Lillian might have added. But under this bright sun the night-blooming cereus did not have such a mysterious aura, Tony thought, although her fine white skin showed not a hint of tan.

They reached shallow water, and Ardis faltered slightly as she kept up with the boat. Tony pulled it



up on the beach and took her arm. She hooked off her swim cap and her dark hair tumbled.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm such a fool; I must have gulped some water and started to get panicky. Thanks again for the lift. That's the first time I ever hitched a ride that way." She gave him a smile that did something to Tony's insides.

"Let's sit on the grass in the shade and you can rest," he suggested.

"All right, but I feel fine now." But her large eyes said, "Protect me," and Tony's knees felt weak.

They went up the sloping beach hand in hand to where the grass began and sat in the shade of the tall poplars with their ever moving leaves. There was a certain appraising look in Tony's eyes as he observed the girl's guileless manner. He'd never realized before that she was a captivating young woman. The few times they had met he had only seen her briefly as she greeted her mother's guests, then disappeared. Now he was acutely aware of her as she sat close to him, leaning toward him so that he caught the faint, strange fragrance of her hair, so close the provocative curve of her young breast all but touched his braced arm. As she called his attention to the antics of a group of children

tossing a big ball in the air, Tony noted her intriguing heart-shaped face and deep violet eyes. Innocence was inherent in her actions. Tony made mental calculations. He would have to wait out the week for Lillian's money, but there was no reason why the waiting should be dull. It pleased his twisted ego that the time could be spent in dalliance with her daughter.

Tony feasted his eyes and his mind hunted for some pretext to see her again. Ardis herself supplied him with the opening.

"I love these bluffs and woods and the shore. I walk them every chance I get and there isn't a bit of it I don't know; all the way from the park here north to the Point, and that way to the power development project. Wild, and filled with every sort of small game and birds, just as nature intended it to be."

"You're a strange one. Do you take these walks alone?"

"Oh yes, but Dad used to go with me until business took him away so much." She sighed. "He did go with me twice this summer, though."

Tony saw his opportunity. "Do you think I could substitute for him once? Say—tomorrow?"

Ardis gave him an arch look, studied him a moment, then smiled. "All right. Meet me at the

lower end of Bay Road, where it turns into Beach. About six in the evening." She stood up and brushed herself off. "Thanks again for the help into shore. It's getting late and I'll have to run."

She skipped off, leaving Tony in a rosy glow. That night he contemplated his reflection in the mirror for a longer period than usual. "You lucky dog," he told himself. He still could not believe his good fortune. "What a plum! Just right for picking." He smiled as he went to sleep.

"I think the shore line is the best place of all to start," Ardis told him late the next afternoon when they met for their walk. She looked fresh in a simple white blouse, bright red shorts, sandals, and a narrow red ribbon in her long black hair. Tony was trim in plain sport shirt, dark trousers and white sneakers.

"Which direction?" asked Tony.

"That way," Ardis pointed south.

As they progressed, the sandy strip became narrower and rockier, and frequently they were forced to scramble over a stricken tree fallen from the bluff above. Ardis showed him the pool of purple clay where she had taken many mud-baths. She gave him her hand for a moment but jerked it away to point out a flock of swallows

flung against an orange-tinted cloud high in the sky. Tony looked, but his gaze quickly returned to her, more lovely than any bird. It was cool in the shadow but sunlight still slanted far out on the lake. When they reached the cyclone fence which marked the boundary of the power company property, the path turned sharply west and they climbed the steep bluff. Ardis seemed to drift effortlessly upward, but Tony puffed a little. He was annoyed, hadn't expected 'a walk' to be so strenuous. They reached the crest and Tony stood a moment to catch his breath. The girl paused, too. The place was remote, and Ardis was so desirable that he gathered her in roughly. He tried to kiss her mouth but she turned her head aside and his lips pressed her cheek. "No, Tony—not here." She twisted away down the trail along the edge of the bluff.

'Not here' she had said. What had she meant by that? That she knew a more suitable place? He took heart from the fact that she did not mention the clumsy attempt again. She moved on ahead like a wraith, occasionally slowing so that he felt the soft brush of her shoulder. But since the way was uneven and treacherous, he concentrated on his footing and made no move to catch her again.

"Just a little way and we will be back at the park. We'll stop at the deserted spring for a cool drink." Her voice drifted back to him.

Ah, the spring, that must be it. Tony knew of it, a secluded place halfway up the hillside in the park. He could use the drink. It was hot going with the branches whipping his face and the exposed roots tearing at his ankles. But as he slogged on, Tony was more determined than ever to conquer.

When they reached the spring Ardis drank first, kneeling delicately on the mossy rim. Some long-forgotten artisan had fashioned a round basin of brick approximately two and a half feet deep and a foot and a half across, into which the cold, crystal water trickled from the pipe protruding from the hillside. She made a picture as she leaned forward, like some woods creature, for the cool water.

"Now it's your turn," Ardis smiled as she stood up.

Tony's thoughts were racing. The place was secluded enough, the only sign of people being a few straggling picnickers around a table far below at the edge of the beach, probably counting noses among the children before starting home. A few lights shone from the distant yacht club. Otherwise—

nothing; but a perfect setting.

Tony crouched to drink, keeping his balance on the slippery rim with his hands beside his knees, much like a dash man at the starting blocks. In one fluid movement Ardis was behind him and hooked her foot under his backward-extended leg. She kicked up quick and hard, and Tony plunged head first into the basin with his shoulders jammed against the rough brick. His arms were pinned helplessly to his sides and he was trapped like a cat in a salmon can. The last thing Tony saw, as he gave a surprised grunt, was a dark head mirrored with his own on the pale surface of the water. His legs flailed and he made horrible muffled noises, hollow-sounding and faint, as from a distance.

Ardis stood quietly by, turning in a slow complete arc to see if anyone had noticed. For some reason, a couple at the table below looked up and the woman gestured to her companion. They were far enough away, Ardis thought.

Tony stopped his aimless kicking and tried to dislodge himself with concerted even thrust of his legs, but the abrasive brick held him fast. The width of the basin was the exact width of his shoulders. Ardis had judged well.

Heedless of the blows they gave

her, Ardis gathered the kicking legs to her body, smothering his efforts in a strong hug. She felt his leg muscles, mindless and frantic, jumping against her. She hung on and pulled down, grinding him into the bottom of the spring. In a few minutes, feeling his body go slack, she gradually released her hold.

Ardis waited a few seconds more, then called, "Oh, please—someone—help! Help!" Her voice broke into the quiet dusk. "He fell in and I can't get him out. Please, someone, hurry!"

The woman below, hearing the distress call, urged the man ahead, and they labored up the steep slope. Ardis was crying and making futile efforts to free Tony when they arrived, panting, beside her.

"He's so heavy," the girl whimpered.

The burly man took over from the girl. Pulling and tugging, he freed Tony, but it was too late, as was evident from the appearance of his face. It was turgid with blood, the nostrils filled with sand.

The woman gathered Ardis into her arms and felt the young girl's body shake with silent sobbing. A park policeman on his rounds arrived at the scene and took charge. They all knew it was hopeless, but they went through the motions. Tony was dead.

"There, there, honey," the woman said in a voice which included everyone. "You go ahead and have your cry. Do you good. I saw what happened." She began to embellish, now that she had the limelight.

"The poor dear was trying to free him after he fell in that hole. Him jammed in there, and her tuggin' to get him out—and her only a slip of a girl. Why, he must weigh two hundred!"

She soothed the shaking girl. "And nobody around to help either." The woman looked around accusingly, patting the dark head held against her ample breast. "It must have been awful for her!"

In the growing darkness, Ardis lifted her face a few inches and, with dry eyes, stole a solemn look at the inert form on the pathway.



One who indulges his philosophy at the expense of action runs the risk of falling victim to his abstention.



Most people never remembered it for long, but Julian's last name was TenEyck. Julian TenEyck—a promise of aristocratic grandeur hardly fulfilled by the quiet young man in person. His notable attributes seemed to be very blond eyebrows, extra-thick rimless glasses, a plaid bow tie and, when on duty at Patterson's Clam House, a red velveteen vest. Most people called him Julian the first few times, then jollied it to Julie, and after that always thought of him that way.

He didn't resent it. Though nearly thirty, he still thought of himself as much younger, except at school, and there he generally felt confused and uncertain. He taught a class in social science at a junior high five days a week. Two nights a week he filled in at Patterson's as spare bartender, Mondays and Tuesdays, which were always slow nights in the off-season.

He told anyone who asked that he bartended to save money toward the day of his marriage, although he was not too sure this was the reason. He was not too sure of the girl either. Her name was Lydia, and she taught first-year French.

Sometimes he secretly admitted to himself that the real reason for moonlighting at Patterson's Clam House was the riverside view from the tall grease-glazed windows opposite the bar, and the tangy smell of salt water when the tide cruised up from the Sound. He also rather liked the difference of the people from those he met in his other, his professional, his expected way of life—clam diggers, fishermen, men

who owned barges and men who owned yachts, men who stayed close to the water for a living and men who lingered near it for the sport; the long and the short and the tall; the rich and the poor, with very few in between at this time of the year before the summer vacationers began to arrive. But they all had one thing in common, an appreciation of good food and drink, and they all drank a lot.

Among the regulars there was only one one-drink man. Nobody seemed to know his real name but everybody called him Goliath. Goliath was a one-drink (and draught beer, at that) man because, as Julie surmised early in the game, he was a one-quarter man. Each night at five-five on the dot, Goliath lumbered into Patterson's, took a stool at the bar, and opened a hamlike fist to release a quarter onto the dark old mahogany.

This meant he wanted a beer. He never ordered it in so many words, but expected the man behind the bar should know without being told. Julie's first encounter with Goliath's slack-jawed taciturnity, some months earlier, had resulted in a certain amount of confusion.

"Yes, sir. What's your pleasure?"

Goliath simply stared at his quarter.

Thinking the man might be deaf,

Julie raised his voice a little. "What'll it be, sir?" Perhaps the guy's dumb, Julie thought. He looked dumb, or deaf; or both.

Goliath just sat impassively on the stool, staring from under painfully granulated lids at the silver coin on the dark wood.

Julie took a beer glass from the drainboard and held it aloft as if to invite comment.

Goliath's watery eyes regarded the glass without comprehension. He blinked after a few seconds, and uttered a word that sounded like "Quarr."

One of several clam diggers at the other end of the bar broke away from the group conversation long enough to say, "What he wants, kid, is a glass of that strong ale, whatever ya call it; the spigot there with the gold head. Better give it to the poor slob before he busts."

After this incident Julie began, on subsequent Mondays and Tuesdays, a desultory study of Goliath. He noticed that the big man's total attention was always concentrated on the quarter until the beer was served. The quarter seemed to be the focal point of his life. Once the foamy glass was in front of him, he divided his attention, obviously with considerable effort, between that and the coin en route to the till. When the dime in

change was set beside the glass, a grimace that might have been a smile momentarily tightened the loose moist lips. Then he sat in a state of drooling catalepsy for the next two hours—"Yes, two whole hours," as Julie emphasized to Lydia—over the single beer and the single dime. It was the life of a moron, in short, but Julie had never met an adult moron before (at least not to his knowledge) and he found this one both fascinating and terrifying.

Lydia kind of summed it up. "*Il est nuit dans ces sombres hivers.*"

"What exactly does it mean, honey?" Julie asked.

"You know, not quite—" said Lydia.

In the beginning, Julie tried to strike up a conversation with Goliath whenever the bar was free of other customers, which was quite often on Monday night. Occasionally Goliath responded to a point.

"You work around here anywhere?"

"Shad bone."

"Interesting. I teach school myself, days. Live around here somewhere?"

"Nacker barn."

"I see. Alone? I mean any relatives?"

"Nacker."

"By the way, Goliath, what's

your real name? Your family's?"

"Sammich."

"Sammich? Sam *what*? Say it once again."

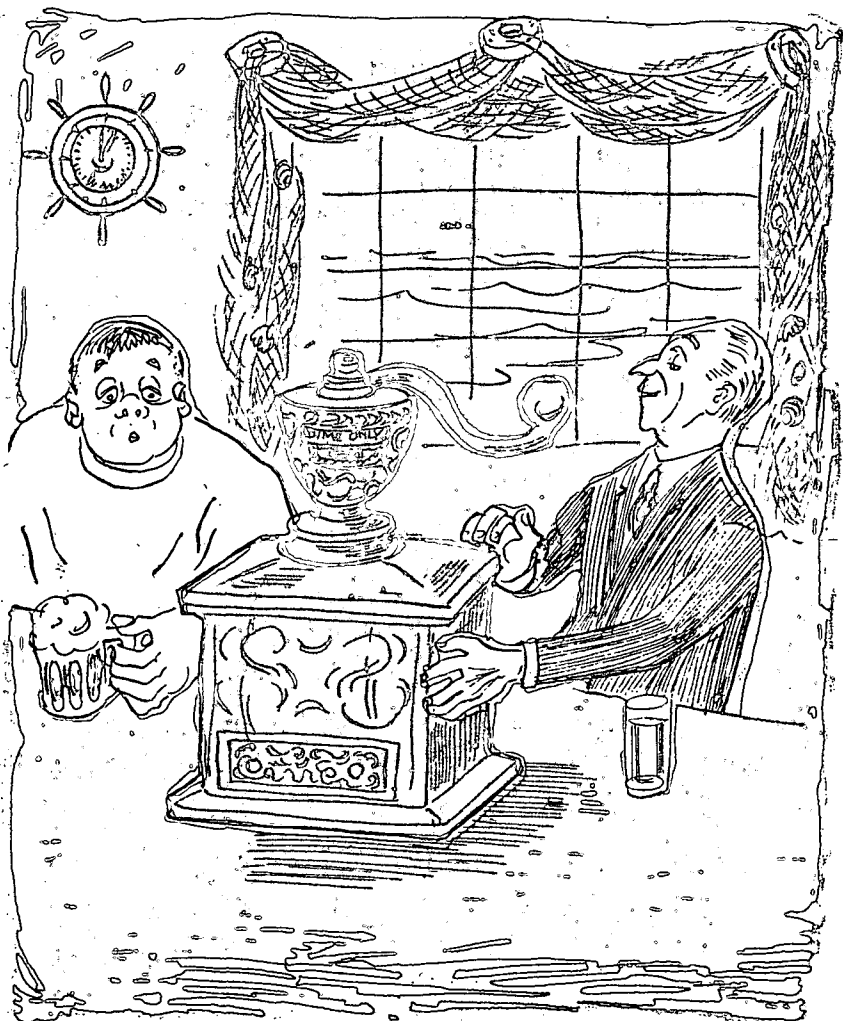
It was useless. What there was to know about Goliath came offhand from other sources, other customers, other drinkers. He lived with a family named Nickerson, very old-line fishermen, with two boats considered good-sized in that area. They sold most of their catch commercially, but also maintained a retail outlet where Goliath was employed in boning out such spiculate fish as shad. That accounted for the long thin knife he always wore in a bruised leather scabbard attached to his belt.

Goliath didn't live in the Nickersons' house. He lived in a room they had built for him in their barn. If he was to any degree related to them by blood, the Nickersons were not known to have acknowledged it. All that was known was they gave him shelter, food, employment and twenty-five cents a day. It sounded like peonage to Julie, and he said as much to Lydia.

She said with a sigh, "*N'en parlons plus.*"

That was where matters stood between them on the Monday night when the man with the saw-buck machine came to Patterson's.

He had been there before, but



never on Monday. He liked a crowd. The sawbuck machine paid off in a crowd, and nobody got mad at it. They treated it as entertainment. But tonight the sawbuck-machine man (nobody ap-

peared to know his name either) looked a bit sloshed to Julie's not especially sharp eyes, as if on a small but deliberate bender, but he had his machine with him. He was the type who had mixed busi-

ness with pleasure so often that he could no longer separate the fundamentals.

"Hiya, kid," he said, gay. "Now don't tell me. I'll remember. But what's your name again? Not yet, though. Let me guess."

"Julian TenEyck."

"I told ya not to tell me. But okay, the harm's done. No use crying over it, the way I say. So okay, Julie, let's get down to the serious business and mix me up a very intoxicating rum collins."

The man placed the sawbuck-machine on the bar. It resembled an old-fashioned coffee mill. The crank was connected to gearage at the crown which was set on a small cupola of wood. At the front of this cupola was a brass-plated slot large enough to take a coin the size of a dime or a penny, but an embossment above it read "Dime Only." A broad base underneath contained a small drawer with two miniature copper knobs.

"Dark or light rum?" asked Julie.

"A bit of both. Why not?"

"Quarr," said Goliath, who was the only other person present.

"Hey," said the sawbuck-machine man, "we got a live one." He pushed his machine a few feet along the bar in Goliath's direction and followed it. "Like to examine the greatest little invention in the world?" He gave the machine a

pat of affection. "Not another one like it anywhere else on this old terrestrial globe of ours. An apparatus both singular and unique." He pushed it a few feet farther. "Don't be shy and dainty, Big Boy. Step right up and examine this fabulous little instrument absolutely free and gratis."

Goliath was staring fixedly and perhaps defensively at his dime on the bar beside the hour-old beer.

"I beg your pardon, Big Boy," said the sawbuck-machine man, cupping hand to mouth in a gesture of broad humor, "but could it be you're a trifle hard of hearing? A mite deaf maybe?"

Goliath took a small sip from his glass and swallowed it with relish.

The sawbuck-machine man noticed the dime. "Well, you got the wherewithal, Big Boy, if you ain't got nothing else. You don't need hearing to enjoy the benefits of my unique little device. You don't need brains or fancy clothes. You don't need blue blood or royal ancestry. This little machine pays no mind to race, creed or color, my friend. Its cogs are cognizant, I repeat, its cogs are cognizant of only one thing in this whole wide world and that one thing is nothing more than a thin dime and a thin dime only. Of which, I notice, one of which you are in pos-

session," he said very provocatively.

"Here's your drink, sir," said Julie, setting the glass at the spot on the bar where the sawbuck-machine man had made initial contact.

"Just a minute, son."

"He's not up to that sort of thing," said Julie.

"He's not? Why not?"

"Well, it's not the sort of thing you like to discuss in public. Why not try your drink here and give me a chance at the machine myself?"

"Well sure," said the man, towing the machine to the drink. "You mean you've never invested before?"

"Not personally. I was in here, busman's holiday, a few Fridays ago, and saw you demonstrating, but I didn't invest personally."

A sound like a growl issued from Goliath.

"I think he wants to invest too," said the man.

"No, he doesn't," said Julie. He glanced sidewise at Goliath and was surprised to see a spark of interest in the usually dull eyes. "He's burping, that's all. He's not—you know—quite right, quite normal." He gave these last two phrases the significance of *sotto voce*.

"Whatever you say," said the man, lifting his drink expansively.

"Well, mister, here's my dime."

"Put it in yourself. The dime entitles you to full control of the operation. That's always been my policy."

Julie dropped the dime in the slot. "Now what do I do? Just turn the crank?"

"Clockwise; ten times."

As Julie began to crank and count, the machine emitted a soft asthmatic whistle.

"Faster," the man said, "or you won't get the full benefit."

Julie cranked faster and the whistle grew shrill. At the count of ten he stopped and so did the whistle. Trying to keep a childish excitement from his voice, he asked, "Now I open the little drawer, is that it?"

"That's it," the man said. "That's just about it." He spoke the words with oracular emphasis.

Julie opened the little drawer. Inside was a ten-dollar bill. He reached for it with a delight disproportionate to the already-known facts of the case.

"Pick it up by the corner," the man said. "The ink is still wet."

Exercising great care, Julie lifted the fresh sawbuck from the drawer and deposited it on a dry part of the bar. Then he removed his glasses and began to polish them with a handkerchief, thinking, *Wouldn't it be wonderful if it was*

real just once, just a couple of times, or ten at most? Some men make it as easy as that. The stock market for instance. Or the daily double. Or oil wells.

"Not a bad return on your investment," the man was saying.

Lydia would think he was nuts. If he ever told her. He replaced his glasses. "Not bad at all," he said with a small laugh. Leaning forward, he hopefully studied the picture of Alexander Hamilton; and on the scroll underneath he read, as was to be expected, the word "Counterfeit."

The sawbuck-machine man seemed to follow his thoughts. "That's what makes it legal, kid—the word there, instead of Hamilton's name. I mean it don't make me a criminal or something, a hot-money man. I'm open and above-board, a joker line. And a little lower down on the bill I give myself added protection, and you too. Take a look."

Julie took a look. Instead of "Will Pay To The Bearer On Demand," the legend had become "Wont Pay To The Bearer On Demand," with the unapostrophized key word in italics.

"That covers the law," the man continued, swishing the remains of his drink around in the glass. "It keeps the game legal. And look at the laughs it gets."

Still somewhat bemused, Julie said, "Yeah, I guess you're right. How long does it take for the ink to dry?"

"Overnight, more or less. Well, I got to be going to my lady love, kid." He drained the glass and picked up the sawbuck-machine. "Goodbye again." He left quickly.

A second after the door closed Julie realized the sawbuck-machine man hadn't paid for the rum collins. He started around the bar, and then something unusual happened.

Goliath had gotten to his feet and was leaving too. What is more, he was leaving behind half a glass of beer and his beloved dime, change from the quarter. The development was so incredible that, for the moment, it immobilized Julie both physically and mentally. Only after the door closed the second time did he return to his usual place between the cash register and the telephone, picking up a bar rag on the way.

Ten minutes later, when he had about decided to dump Goliath's beer and put the dime in an escrow glass, the big fellow returned, and he was carrying the sawbuck machine.

Stupefied, Julie watched Goliath resume his accustomed seat. He watched him set the sawbuck machine on the bar. He watched him

toss off the flat beer in one enormous gulp. Incredulous, he watched him insert his dime in the machine and crank out a wild piercing whistle; watched the plump red fingers fumble at the tiny knobs of the tiny drawer; watched the sawbuck being clumsily extracted and placed thoughtlessly in a slick of beer; imagined the wet image of Alexander Hamilton darkening out of countenance.

"Boll," said Goliath. "Whiskey boll."

He spoke with a note, wholly new, of demented authority, snapping Julie from his stupor. "How did you get that machine, Goliath? Speak up now. You didn't hurt that man, did you?"

"Boll," said Goliath, tapping the bogus bill with a stubby forefinger. "Whiskey boll. Now."

"Not until you tell me how you got that machine," said Julie in what he regretfully recognized as his schoolteacherish way.

Goliath got heavily to his feet and patted the scabbard that contained the fish-boning knife. Then

he drew a finger across his throat and sat down again.

It took Julie several seconds to get it. "You mean you—oh no, you don't mean—"

His doubts were dispersed by the expression of insane satisfaction on Goliath's face.

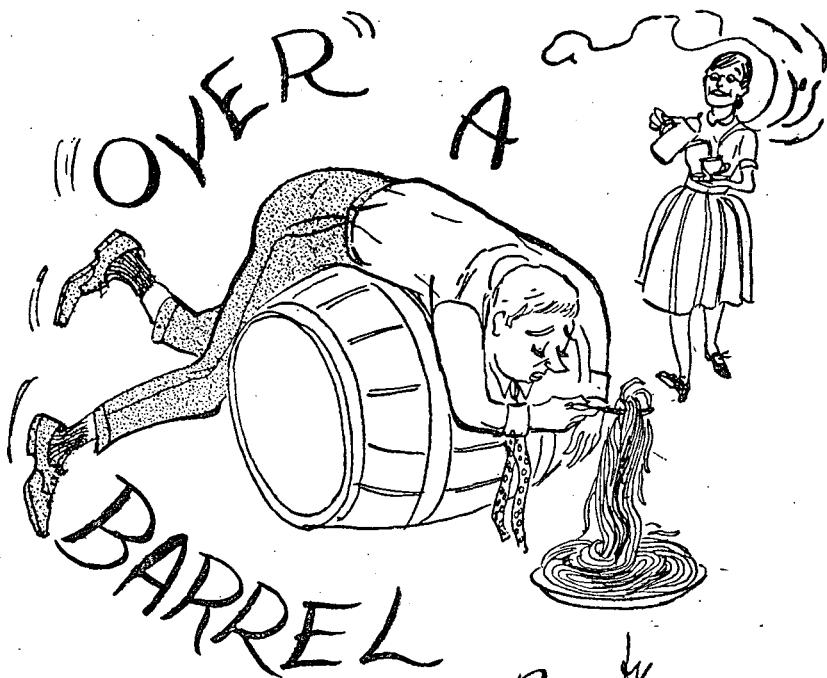
"Why, that's simply horrible! Goliath, I'm ashamed of you. This is big trouble. Big. You don't understand it but it's very big trouble, and I'm going to have to call somebody. The police or somebody."

"Whiskey boll," said Goliath. "Now. Quarr, quarr." He picked the smeared bill off the bar and held it out.

"And besides the money is no good, Goliath," said Julie sententiously as he went to the telephone. "It's play money. It has no value." He lifted the receiver and dialed the operator. As the signal began buzzing in his ear he turned to tell Goliath in simpler terms what was meant by a counterfeit, but he had time only to see the blazing wing of steel in flight and to think *What a silly way to—*



*Once a course is charted, it is singular, indeed, when interjection
of a foreign element is permitted to create diversionary influence.*



WHEN a guy reaches thirty-two and owns nothing of monetary value, it's time to change his ways. I began thinking. There seemed only two ways to get money: marry it, or steal it. I'd make a poor thief; I'm a bank clerk who

knows the pitfalls awaiting the robber. Some of them get shot! And, unfortunately, my taste in women doesn't lean towards a

shrinking, homebody type of girl.

I like carefree cuties like Stormy Dunlap, who sings at a bar across town. She's the impetuous doll who kept me broke, but I considered I got my money's worth. She might even be willing to marry me, strictly for laughs. I'm tall and have looks enough to keep her interest. We've had some great times. But, there would be no barrel-of-money dowry coming with her.

Yesterday, opportunity waved its pretty flag. It meant giving up Stormy temporarily. The idea came when I was totaling my cash on the comptometer, which is a gateway across from President Cole's desk. Mr. Cole had old J. P. Fellin with him, whom everyone knows about, though he seldom comes around. People go to him. J. P. Fellin is a rich man. He owns scads of stock, mortgages, trust deeds; he even owns the block of real estate the bank is on. I heard Mr. Cole thanking him for designating the bank as executor of his estate, if and when.

J. P. Fellin brushed his thanks aside: "Attorneys die. The bank's a corporation. I want my niece to continue building what I started."

"She's a fortunate girl," Mr. Cole solicitously agreed.

"She wasn't at first. I cut her off several years ago. Made her

earn her own way to teach her the value of the dollar. She's not to know about my will. I don't want her fawning around. She can have it when I go."

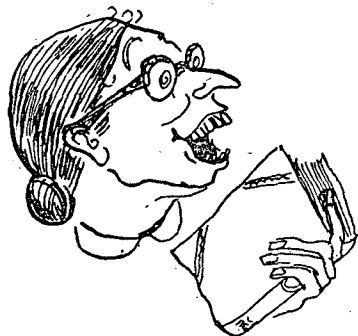
I stopped punching the keys to notice Ron Terwilliger, the assistant cashier. He was all ears, listening to them the same as I was. I've been at the bank longer than he, but he had the advantage of business college. We're competitors at the bank, and he's a sneaky type. Keeps trying to get something on me. Ron is about twenty-nine or thirty, and I'll admit he's better looking. Believe me, we don't like each other.

I hoped Ron wasn't thinking of the same thing I was: getting friendly with Fellin's niece. I didn't know her, and wondered if Ron did. I saw him walk to the list of our depositors and scan the names. When he walked back to his desk, I made a check of my own. Sure enough! I found her name listed—Agnes Fellin. She could have been living in the East, for all I knew. She had been doing all right, with over four thousand dollars in her account. I pulled her file and learned she was a librarian.

Needless to say, I went to the library that night and got a look at her. Dowdy? Oh, I mean! She was a wholesome type of woman

who looked fifty even though she was thirty. She wore a starched blouse with a full skirt; her brown hair was bunned and she wore horn-rimmed spectacles. I tried to find something attractive about her, since I was going to attempt courting her. The best I could come up with was, that she was female.

I wandered around the classics for awhile. I wouldn't have known they were classics, except for the



sign. I then wandered over to the index file and looked up an impressive title. Soon as Miss Fellin was idle, I approached her.

"Could you locate this book?" I inquired, with my best smile. She peered down her long nose to use her bifocals. I nearly ducked out when she looked up and smiled. I haven't many aversions, but kissing a girl with buck teeth is one of them.

"Why, yes, Mr. Marshall, I can," she said.

I was surprised, though pleased, that she knew my name. "Oh, Miss Fellin," I said, "I didn't know you knew me."

"Of course," she said; "you've often waited on me at the bank."

"Yes, but there one doesn't have time for social pleasantries," I replied. I followed her to a book rack and she removed a four pound volume.

"I never suspected you were interested in ruins," she said.

"A hobby of mine, ruins," I said quickly.

"Have you studied archeology?"

"Not lately. I'm taking it up again."

She cocked her head sideways. She looked a little like a cow with a crick in her neck. "I haven't seen you at the library before?"

"No, but you'll see plenty of me from now on."

She did. I began killing all my time there. The only thing I regretted was, letting her think I was interested in old bones and antiques. I couldn't hang around and read sexy novels or sport magazines. I had to sit at a table and pretend to read the most boring junk; she kept bringing books over to me. I took to sitting there with one hand holding my head and the other pinching my leg. She caught me asleep, once.

It was ten days before I dared to

ask her out for coffee. I'd observed she had a half hour off, at six, for dinner, but only took coffee in the diner across the street.

"Why, thank you kindly, Mr. Marshall," she said. I noticed people in the library smiling when we left. When we ordered coffee at the counter, she regarded me skeptically.

"Do you use anything in your coffee?" she asked

"Just cream and sugar."

"Really, you shouldn't." She shook her head.

"Really, I don't," I corrected. "I made a joke."

"I'm glad. Cream and sugar are not congruent—"

"I know what you mean. I've drunk mine black for years," I lied. I hate black coffee, but I had to find something in common with her. The coffee sessions became a ritual for us the next four nights in a row. All Dutch Treat!

Friday night I propositioned her. "Miss Fellin, would you be kind enough to have dinner with me on Sunday? My treat, of course. I'm so often alone. We could go to ahhh . . ." I couldn't think where a woman like her would go.

She doubtfully considered me. "To the museum?" she asked.

"To the museum," I said positively.

"Yes, Mr. Marshall, I would, but

only if you'll allow me to reciprocate by having you to dinner at my home, twice."

"Twice?"

"Yes. Now, it might not suit you? I never have dinner until after nine, when I get home from the library."

"Miss Fellin, this is astounding. I never eat dinner until after nine."

"Well, I never!" she said.

"Yes! Isn't it a coincidence?"

I can tell you right now, no matter how you get money, you have to earn it. My simple plan to marry money took a new turn. It was obvious to me I couldn't remain married to Miss Fellin, if she did become Mrs. Marshall. I'd have to lose her fossil hunting in the desert, or slip her over a cliff; I might nudge her off a boat; some way she'd have to go. But, as I thought of it, I realized Uncle J. P. Fellin would have to expire first, possibly with my help.

Uncle J. P. is the type of man who would outlive his heirs and go to their funerals in a wheel chair. California is full of them. I devised an infallible plan. I'd court Agnes to a point where I knew she'd marry me, then get rid of her uncle. She didn't know she would receive his money. I supposedly didn't know. No one could suspect me for doing him in, because I had no apparent motive. I could marry

Agnes right afterwards, and be as surprised about the fortune as she'd be.

When I took her to dinner on Sunday I nearly slipped and mentioned her uncle. It would have been a mistake to let her know I knew about her cantankerous rich uncle. I tried to impress her with a fancy restaurant. Agnes was dressed up in black, with a knit stole around her shoulders. She was suspicious of the waiter who showed us to a booth with a tablecloth. The instant she looked at the menu, her eyebrows took off.

"Mr. Marshall!" she screeched. "Do you patronize this place? The prices are atrocious!"

"Never been here in my life," I said, getting to my feet. She had jumped to hers. I hurried after her to open the door. When we reached the front, the headwaiter rushed over.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Marshall?" he asked.

"We're not hungry," I said, and ushered Agnes out.

Outside she stared at me. "Why didn't you tell him the truth? And how did he know your name?"

"He—he comes in the bank. All the time. Regular customer. I couldn't hurt his feelings about the prices. He only works there."

"Oh," she said, biting her lip. "Mr. Marshall, you are a tender-

hearted man. I shall show you a reasonable place to dine. You must watch your money. And if you would like, you may call me Agnes."

"Agnes, I'd love to. And please call me Charles."

"I shall, Mr. Marshall."

When it came her turn to serve me dinners, I went up there with a growling stomach. I didn't know what to expect, but I had to be empty enough to swallow it. It was spaghetti. She explained the reason I had to dine twice. It was more economical to make a big bowl. Pastas aren't my favorite dish, but I was hungry enough. She set a presentable table; nice dishes and everything. There was spaghetti, water, day-old bread marked down a nickel from the bakery, and some kind of yellow stuff in the butter dish. I expertly twisted a large forkful of dark spaghetti and got it into my mouth. Oh, mother dear! I'll tell you; tears came to my eyes.

"Mmmmmh," I said, while I could still speak.

"I'm so glad," she said. "It's my one vice—loading spaghetti with Mexican chile sauce. Not everyone likes it. And it's difficult to find spices that are hot enough, some of them are labeled extra hot, but they're not. I double the recipe."

It was difficult not to remain

poor. She was eating a salad, claiming spaghetti was a man's dish, and she wouldn't touch it. I had to eat the rest of it the next night.

She watched me enjoy it. "Charles," she said, "you drink entirely too much water with your meals. Would you like your coffee, instead?"

"Agnes, I'd love it. I feel like a king. Spaghetti, and black coffee, and black pepper—what else could I wish for?"

I got to see her buck teeth again. "You say the wittiest things, Charles," she smiled as she got up. "Save room for your dessert. I've baked you a sugarless cake."

"That was sweet of you, Agnes."

The routine went on for a month. I'd take her out on Sundays, and she'd dinner me twice at her apartment. It got to a point where I didn't cringe when she'd announce, "I've made your favorite again." The roof of my mouth had calloused.

By not chasing around, money piled up on me. I gave Agnes an excuse, and took a Saturday night off. I hurried out to the jolly little tavern to see Stormy. She was late arriving, and I didn't get a chance to talk with her until after she did her numbers. I waited for her on the end stool at the bar, and hoped she hadn't made a previous date. She never looked so pretty. Red

hair, seductive eyes, and a shape that, well . . .

When she finished, she walked up with her hand out. "Chuck," she said, "I thought you died!"

"Let's go some place and I'll tell you," I said.

She shook her head and drawled, "Honey, I've been taken."

"Ah, come on, Stormy," I pleaded.

"No, Chuck. It's for real this time. I'm engaged. I'm quitting the end of next week."

I don't know why, but I sort of imagined Stormy would be in my future, after I pulled my little caper; but it was typical of her to chase around if I didn't show up. "Stormy, you're always falling for somebody," I accused. "Now listen to me. I'm going to come into money. Big money—"

"Meet my fiance," she said, nodding her head toward someone back of me. "Ron, this is Chuck."

It was Ron Terwilliger, all right, looking guilty as the devil. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "Helen said she had chased around with a Chuck, but I never guessed it was you!"

"You know each other?" Stormy asked. I never called her Helen. I nodded.

"Yeah, you might say. We work at the same bank." I turned to Stormy. "When did all this hap-

pen? Kind of sudden, isn't it?"

Ron claimed he just happened to drop by the night club, if you can call it that, and it was love at first sight. I had my own opinion. Stormy didn't know it, but Ron was lying. He had seen her before, with me. I caught sight of Ron at Santa Anita one Saturday when I had Stormy with me, and smelled trouble right away. Ron just didn't happen to go to the races. He isn't the type. He was tailing me. That was when we were both in the running for the assistant cashier's job, that he got. On Monday morning there was a surprise check on cash boxes. I had the laugh on him. Mine was right to the penny, thanks to a loan from Stormy. Otherwise, I'd have been a hundred short. I always paid Stormy back; the cash box, too. But that was when he set eyes on Stormy. I couldn't say a thing. I thought Ron was wise I was chasing Fellin's niece, because he, no doubt, checked her out himself. When he saw I was making a play for Agnes, he stepped in and took Stormy.

I wouldn't have felt so bad if I knew Stormy only meant to chase around with him. But they were going to get married! I couldn't see what they saw in each other. Stormy is my type of girl, and Ron is one of those perfectionists who manages the right thing without a

fault. I never really liked him.

I wished them well, to their faces, and took off. I had three weeks to change Stormy's mind. Ron informed me that's when the church wedding would be. When he mentioned church wedding, Stormy's face lighted with rapture. If that's what it took to make her ecstatic, I'd buy her a church and marry her every weekend. It galled me to know that a square like Ron . . . Anyway, I had to make time with heiress Agnes.

I started pressing, using every trick I knew. I let her sew a button on my coat. When her hand touched me, I sighed. I figured it was time to profess my love, which I did that night, after a spaghetti dinner. I knelt beside her chair and asked for her hand. She held out one hand and told me to get up.

"Charles," she said, "let's go over to the couch and talk this over." I agreed. I took my black coffee with me. She looked at me doubtfully for a few uncomfortable moments. Finally she said, "Why do you wish to marry me?"

I've never answered a tougher question. I had to look at it from her point of view, and make it sound logical. "Agnes," I said, "I'm tired of living alone, and most women of today are far too . . . Well, you know what I mean. But

when I'm with you, I—I just like being with you. We have so much in common. And you know, of course, I love you."

She bit her lip. "I see," she said. "Well, I like you very much, Charles. However, marriage is a serious undertaking."

"I know," I mumbled.

"Do you believe in children?"

Whoa, I said to myself. This could be a leading question. I said, "Yes, I believe I do. I see them around."

"Do you want children?" she persisted.

"I want you," I told her. "Can't we discuss children later?" She nodded. For all I knew, she might have wanted to adopt children. With Agnes, I couldn't conceive any other way.

Three days later she agreed to marry me. I finally had thought of the right proposition; it would be more economical to live together. I told her, "We could share one apartment, go halves on the food, split the utilities . . ."

"Charles, you're an impetuous man," she answered, "but you are logical. Yes, we'll marry. Now, let's inventory ourselves. Just what are your prospects?"

They were pretty good, if things kept working out, but I couldn't show her anything tangible. "Everything I have is yours," I said,

offering next to nothing, but it was a shrewd thing to tell her. She'd remember my willingness to share my all with her. It would help me later persuade her to place her uncle's wealth in a joint account.

"Thank you, Charles," she said. "But what about my career? Would you resent it if I continued working?"

I wasn't aware she had a career. If she meant working at the library, I couldn't have cared less. But she didn't fool me; it was another catch question. She still thought it incredible a man wished to marry her. "Agnes," I said, patting her hand, "I'll try not to be a demanding husband. Your happiness is the thing. I'd prefer you didn't work, but I'd certainly understand, and respect your own decision in the matter. However, when I'm wealthy enough to give you all the luxuries, I'll insist you quit. I want to travel the world with you."

"You are romantic, Charles. Well, realistically, I feel if we are stringent and watch our pennies—both keep working and forego foolish things, we can save enough for our old age."

"Agnes, you paint an enchanting future. Shall we get married tonight?"

"Tonight? Gracious, no! We should be engaged at least—six

months sounds proper. And whatever you do, don't waste your money on an engagement ring."

"I promise."

"A gold band will be adequate."

"You're so practical, Agnes. But I can't wait six months. I won't be able to sleep, work . . ." I saw I wasn't getting through to her.

"Agnes, we'll be wasting six months of double rent, and utilities, and—"

"Charles, I'm sorry. You're right! Yes! Conventions aren't that important. We'll take a bus to Las Vegas this Saturday."

With pencil and paper I convinced her it was cheaper to drive up in my car; which it was for two people, not for one. I lamented one thing. Stormy and Ron were getting married the same weekend. It had taken me two weeks to clinch it with Agnes. I rationalized, I'd get Stormy away from Ron, once I was rich. And, too, with both of us having been married, there wouldn't be any jealousy of former mates.

I had three days left to do away with J. P. Fellin. It was Tuesday night that Agnes said yes. After work Wednesday, I drove out to the Fellin residence. He has a big home at the top of a hill in an exclusive residential area. I parked at the end of the street and watched the home with the binoculars I

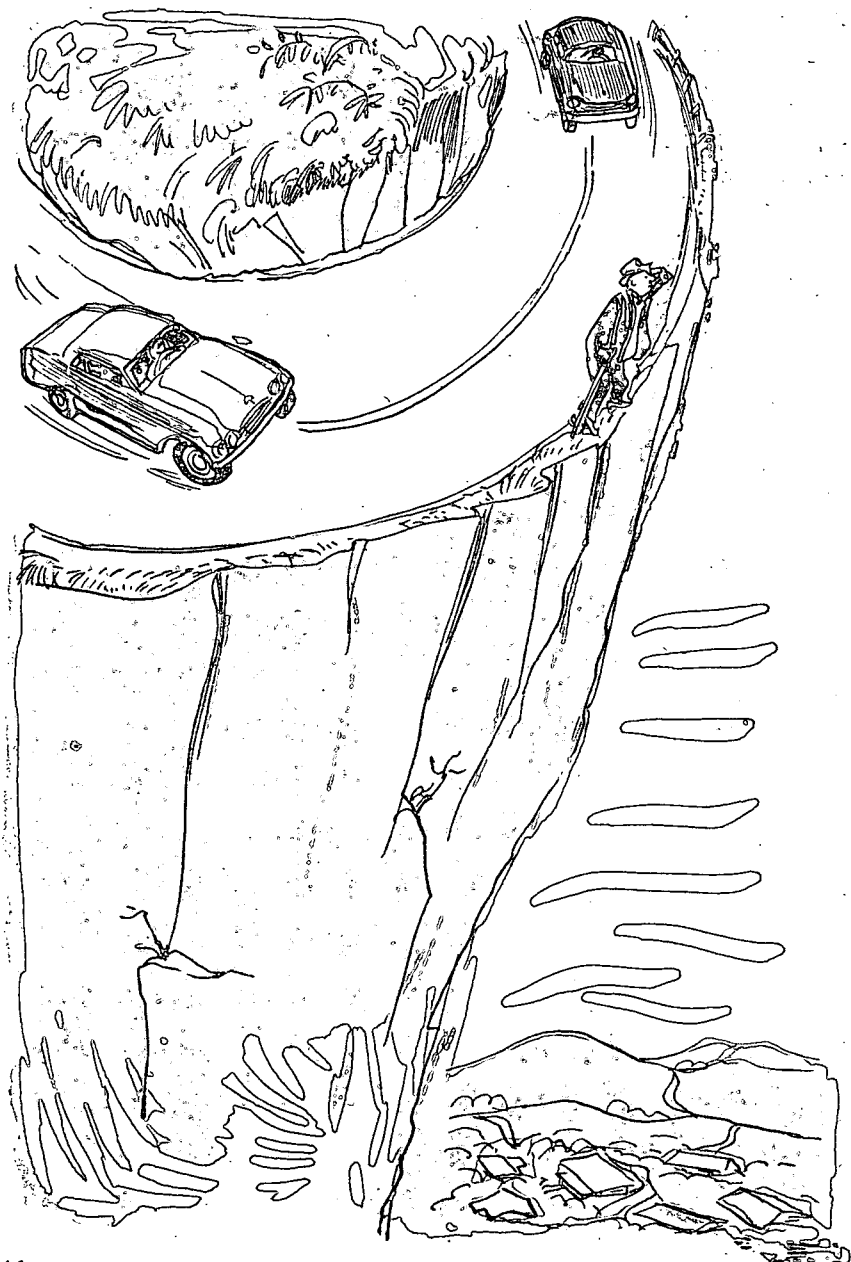
used at the race track. No one could see me.

Frankly, I hadn't the least idea how to do it. Like I said, I wouldn't chance robbing anyone; too many possibilities of being caught. People guard their possessions more than they do their lives. I wanted something spontaneous to happen to him that could appear an accident; something where I wouldn't be observed as the cause. I found a solution that same afternoon, when J. P. Fellin came out for a walk.

By posing as a solicitor, I talked with a man trimming roses in his front yard. He didn't want any health insurance, and laughed when I asked if the man going down the block might be interested.

"That's J. P. Fellin," he said. "He takes a constitutional walk every night. You'll never sell him insurance. That ornery character is too healthy."

J. P. Fellin did walk every night before dark. I checked again on Thursday. The road leading up the hill intersects near the top, where there are no homes. There are only steep banks and cliffs you wouldn't want to fall from. The two roads wound around to meet on the level hilltop. J. P. walked the half-mile circle without trouble, for the roads themselves were



not steep. I figured if a car nudged him over the edge, who'd know?

J. P. Fellin was a man of habit. Both Wednesday and Thursday he stopped where the drop was straight down, to shade his eyes and look out at the valley. Friday I parked up the right hand branch and waited for him.

I had it figured out. I wasn't going to blast my car into him. I was going to coast it down and catch him while he was standing on the curb, gazing at the view. If I didn't catch him with my fender, I could reach out the window with my hand and give him enough of a shove to tumble him off the cliff. I ducked down in the seat when I saw him reach the intersection. He glanced around without noticing my car. He then proceeded to his vantage point and stepped up on the curb with his back turned to me. It was perfect. No one could see. I released my brake and coasted toward him. I had to go over to the wrong side of the road.

I guess because I was concentrating on J. P. Fellin, I didn't see the other car. It must have come from around the hill. Anyway, I was on the wrong side of the road. At the last instant, the other driver saw me and tried to stop, but not in time. We banged head-on. Not real hard, but it caused a resound-

ing crash. We collided directly behind J. P. Fellin's turned back. Neither of our cars touched him. They didn't have to. The sudden noise startled him and he lost his balance. He practically leaped out in space.

I got out of my car, reaching for a cigarette. I was in a hell of a mess. When the authorities found out I was courting his niece, they'd have me for murder. Then, when I saw who got out of the other car, I said, "Oh, mother dear, I've had it!" There would be no way to lie out of it. It was Ron Terwilliger! His face was white. He rushed up to me.

"Who fell?" he shouted.

"I'm not sure!" I said quickly. "Did you hit someone?"

"No! No! He fell!" Ron suddenly grabbed my arm. "What are you doing up here?"

I couldn't think of an answer. "What are you doing up here? I just wander up here to look through my binoculars," I lamely added. My question bothered him.

"Look, Chuck, I bring papers up for J. P. to sign. I was late tonight. They said at the house he was taking a walk so I drove . . . Chuck, that was J. P. Fellin who . . . Do you realize the trouble we're in?"

I did some fast thinking. Ron was upset, and worried about his job. "Ron," I said. "Suppose we

both get out of here? It was an accident. You fix your bumper, and I'll fix mine. It wasn't our fault he jumped to his death. If we keep our mouths shut, we can't be connected with the accident. It *was* an accident?"

Ron nervously pinched his chin. "Two employees from the same bank. It would look . . . Chuck, we could be accused of murder! I'm getting married Sunday."

"Then let's beat it!"

"You're right. We'll have to."

We both backed our cars up and checked to be sure we hadn't dropped anything. Ron didn't ask me what I was doing on the wrong side of the road. I finally thought of a good answer. I could say I was coasting up to talk to the old gentleman looking at the view. I didn't know who he was. When I got down to the bottom of the hill, my hands stopped shaking. It hadn't worked out so bad. Ron could never reveal I was there without implicating himself, and I was rid of Uncle J. P. Fellin. And at the worst, if it suddenly came out, I had a witness I hadn't touched J. P. Fellin. It *was* an accident as far as Ron knew.

My bumper was only slightly bent. I didn't have to bother getting it straightened. Saturday, I bought a six-dollar gold ring and drove Agnes to Las Vegas. J. P.'s

death didn't make the morning papers. They didn't find him in time. It was in the evening papers in Las Vegas: 'Millionaire Falls to His Death'. He wasn't worth quite that much, but it made good copy.

At our wedding supper, in a diner, I took the paper on the counter to our booth. I let Agnes see the headlines and watched her. She read them dispassionately, and turned the page. I guessed she really hated him. She thought he had cut her out of his will. She probably had disowned him in her own way. She had a pleasant surprise coming.

I was never in better spirits. I had just married a woman who was going to inherit a fortune. I did everything I could to please her. We spent our wedding night in a motel. The only thing I'll say is, never, never marry a spinster. I was never so surprised in my life. Of course, love *is* free, but there's a limit. Anyway, I managed to drive her back to Pasadena on Sunday, with no irreparable damage. I moved in with Agnes. Her rent was less than mine.

Monday morning she made me rolled oats and black coffee for breakfast. I got myself a candy bar from the vending machine in the bank. Ron immediately came over to my cubicle before opening time. "You didn't show up for the wed-

ding," he said in an accusing voice. "Helen was disappointed. We sent you an invitation. I—I hoped you wouldn't be mad."

"Who's mad?" I countered. "Under the circumstances, we don't want hard feelings. Extend my congratulations to Stormy. You, too. I couldn't be there because I got married, too."

I watched his eyes narrow. "You're kidding?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. I wondered if he were going to accuse me of attempting to murder J. P. Fellin. "I married a sensible girl. I met her at the library last month."

He was bound to know Agnes was Fellin's niece. He surprised me by nodding. "Congratulations, yourself. I'll tell Helen."

"Yeah, do that," I retorted. I saw Mr. Cole lead two men over to his desk. Ron looked like he knew who they were. I asked him, "Who has Mr. Cole got with him?"

Ron flicked his eyes at me. He whispered. "Detectives. They called about Fellin's will. Look, Chuck, I'll see Cole gives you a raise. He was going to, anyway."

Ron didn't have to tell me that he had previously stopped it; but we now shared a guilt where we'd have to oblige each other in the future. "Ron," I told him. "I'm go-

ing to check some figures on the comptometer. I'd like to hear what's going on." Ron nodded.

"I'll help you," he said.

We stood there and punched a few keys senselessly and studied the totals. Mr. Cole explained how the will would have to be probated, and that J. P. Fellin's niece was the only heir. He then asked them if anything were wrong.

"Strictly routine," the stout man answered. "There has to be an inquest. We're diggin' up the facts."

"I see," Mr. Cole answered. "Well, the niece doesn't know she is to inherit. I'm sending her a letter."

"We'll probably break the news to her," the other man answered. "Thanks, Mr. Cole." He took a paper Mr. Cole gave him. I presumed Agnes' name and address was on it. They'd find her home. She didn't go to the library until noon.

I looked at Ron as we walked away from the comptometer. If he was going to make a crack about me marrying Agnes Fellin, I wanted him to have it out. I said, "The niece is a mighty lucky girl. I wonder who she is?"

"Hard telling, but I'm glad they don't suspect how it happened. We're in the clear," he said.

Agnes didn't quit her job and come flying down to the bank. She

went to work. I waited in the apartment, and then drove to the library and picked her up at nine. She didn't mention a word about her inheritance. I knew she was tight with money, but I didn't expect her to withhold the news. There was no way I could bring the subject up. But I knew she'd have to come down to the bank and sign papers and things. I thought maybe she was saving it for a surprise? I left her Tuesday morning, expecting her to show up at Mr. Cole's desk.

When I got to the bank, I discovered Ron wasn't there. That was unusual for Ron, and it worried me. Then Mr. Cole summoned me to his desk.

"Charles, you've been with us some time," he said. I figured he had learned I had unknowingly married J. P.'s heir. He probably wanted me to stay on as Vice-President. "With Ronny leaving us," he continued, "I'm going to promote you to assistant cashier."

"Ron's leaving?" I asked.

"Yes. Quite a surprise to all of us. His wife insists he retire. She

wants him to travel," he told me.

"Stormy does?"

"Who? No, his wife. Helen Dunlap—Mr. Fellin's niece."

"His niece?" I choked. "What about Agnes Fellin?"

Mr. Cole looked at me doubtfully as I turned white.

"Are you ill?" he asked. "Who did you say? Agnes Fellin? No relation whatever. Many people are named Fellin. Perhaps not as many as Smith and Brown . . . At any rate, Mr. Fellin's niece was his sister's child. Helen never told Ronny she had a rich uncle. Ronny was stunned by the news. He just called. I didn't see you at their wedding . . . Charles! You are sick!"

I'm worse than sick. Ron is a conniving murderer. He also deliberately stuck me with Agnes. I might have to confess the whole thing to escape her. Just this morning she was talking about me taking out a large insurance policy—and the way she likes money? I can't get rid of her; everybody would know her husband did it. I'll have to think it out.



The following, I believe, is satisfactory evidence that a man need not be over seventy "to offer one (woman) the devotion of a lifetime."



OUR livingroom was pleasantly warm, the stereo on low with sentimental ballads by Sinatra and the late Nat Cole, mood music Lydia and I both enjoy. I was sprawled on the couch, correcting the last of some term papers, while Lydia was curled up in the reclining chair, fooling with a crossword

puzzle. She was wearing a thin robe, and each time she went to the kitchen I noticed the faint curve of her stomach with a true sense of pride and excitement. Lydia was three months pregnant—our

first, and a happy event for us.

On her fourth trip to the kitchen, I asked, "We had supper two hours ago. Are you still hungry, baby?"

"Not hungry, thirsty. I don't know, I've had juice and ginger ale but . . . Oh my!"

"Oh my, what?" As the look of amazement crossed her pixie face it hardly seemed possible Lydia would be a "mama" in a half a year from now. Although she's twenty-three, Lydia looks like a teen-ager.

She said, "Al, I never believed it actually happens, like in the books and movies, but I do have this crazy yen for celery tonic! It's too idiotic, because I can't even recall especially liking it before."

I slipped on my old windbreaker.

"Oh, Al, don't you be silly too. It's merely a dumb whim. I'll drink some orange juice. Really, Al, it's 10:00 p.m."

"So what? That little grocery down the street is open until midnight. I'll be back within five minutes."

"Al, really, I . . ."

I crossed her heavy red lips with my finger. "Lydia, you're going to be pregnant with all the trimmings. I like the idea of getting this silly soda. I mean it, I get a charge out of this, for some rea-

son. Do you want anything else, coconuts, pickles, Brazil nuts or some . . .?"

"Oh stop it, you fool. Hurry back, Al, dear."

"Five minutes and you shall have your celery tonic cocktail, my lady."

The night was cloudy, with a hint of snow in the air. The plump old grocer was reading a paper as he leaned on the counter. When I asked if he had celery tonic, the man blinked, said sadly, "This is my big night. I should have shut early. Business is slow and now you want celery tonic. Mister, that's a summer drink, and not much of a seller then."

"Yes. Is there someplace where I can get some?" I asked, disappointed.

"Sure, take a plane down to Miami Beach. Hey, it's just possible there might be a bottle left in the bottom of the cooler. You know how it is; I never clean it out, only add more sodas. It's over in the corner, behind that display of cereal. I told the cereal man my store is too small for such a display, but he gave me a deal. Do you mind digging into the cooler yourself, mister? My feet are killing me."

"Oh, I don't mind at all."

The large red metal box with sodas was hidden by this pile of cereal boxes and a large cardboard cutout of a husky football player

stuffing his mouth with the mush. Opening the cooler, I started pushing the cold soda bottles aside. It took me a moment or two to reach the bottom, and there, in a few inches of ice water, was this *one* small bottle of celery tonic. I was as pleased as if I'd found a jewel.

As I grabbed the bottle and straightened up, I heard a deep voice growl, "Get your mitts up, Pops! This is a stickup!"

Holding the bottle by its neck, I was still hidden by the cereal display. I couldn't believe I had heard rightly. Peeking over the cardboard football player's arm, I saw a heavysset man, his dark, leather-jacketed back to me. He was wearing a thin, white cap. I also saw the ugly automatic in his hand, the wide-eyed fear in the old grocer's face as he mumbled, "Don't hurt me, please!"

"Shut up!" The thug reached over the counter with his free hand, scooped up the bills in the cash register and asked, "This all?"

"That's all, things are slow."

"Come on, Pops, you want to stay alive, tell me where you keep your big bills!" The thug took a step backward, waving the gun at the old man. He was less than two feet from me, and without being aware of what I was doing, I brought the bottle down on the white cap. My hand was cold and

wet, the sweet smell of celery tonic all around me. Then there was a sickening thud as the goon fell toward the counter, slipped to the floor, blood running down his thick face. The gun dropped from his hand, struck the floor with a clean little sound.

I glanced at the broken bottle of soda in my right hand, like a fool. The grocer was still staring bug-eyed, but not at me. Following his eyes out to the street, I saw another leather-jacketed young man coming in. His face was pale and evil, the gleam of a knife in his hand.

Again, as if watching myself, with almost reflex action I dropped the broken bottle and stepped from behind the display. I knelt to pick up the gun on the floor. The other punk was in the doorway as I fired, the sound of the gun filling the little store with thunder.

The punk staggered back, before falling face forward through the doorway. I glanced with disbelief at the bloody man at my feet, then at the still form in the doorway. I didn't need to see the terribly bright red pool of blood forming at one side of the leather jacket to know I'd killed a man. I shut my eyes to keep from getting sick, wondering when I'd awake from this nightmare.

But the grocer's screams of,

"Help! Help! Police! Help!" were too real for a dream.

I don't know how long I stood there, time seemed endless. Probably it was only a matter of seconds before I heard the rush of footsteps, opened my eyes to see the welcome blue of a policeman's uniform.

I let the gun fall into a basket of oranges, then turned away from the doorway as the grocer started explaining, still screaming, how I had foiled the hold-up.

The policeman, a swarthy-faced young fellow, had his gun out as he bent to examine the man on the floor. Then he reached for the grocer's phone. As he was talking to the precinct house and asking for an ambulance, I shook my still wet right hand and started for the door, knowing I'd have to step over the man I'd killed, wondering if I'd be able to do that. All I wanted was to hold Lydia in my arms and . . .

The cop called, "Hey you! Where you going?"

"H-home. My wife . . . she's waiting for me." My voice sounded distant.

"You ain't going no place, mister. Technically, you're under arrest for . . . for . . . manslaughter, at least. Maybe two of 'em."

"What!" the old grocer roared. "This man saved my money, maybe

my life! You see the knife in that thug's hand? The man shot in self-defense!"

"Take it slow, both of you," the cop said. "All I know is, he's killed a man. As to whether it was a justified homicide, that's for the judge to say, not me. When the radio car comes, you'll have to come along with me, mister. Probably a technicality, like I said."

I nodded. I could see the headlines: COLLEGE INSTRUCTOR KILLS THUG! It wasn't possible a man's whole life could be changed in a matter of minutes! Why, I'd never even had a fist fight in my life, at least not since I was a kid. I said, "Look, officer, my wife is . . ." I couldn't finish the sentence. *I'd killed a man!*

"Don't worry, we'll notify your wife. I don't know, you might even be home before morning and then . . ."

"Officer, you see my wife's pregnant, and I don't want her upset."

"Look, stay put, we'll take care of things." The policeman holstered his gun and took out a little notebook, glanced at his watch. "Nothing to worry about, you'll end up a hero in the papers. Who are you, mister?"

"Who am I? I'm merely a man who went out for a bottle of celery tonic . . . five minutes ago . . . another lifetime ago. . . ."

Schemes propelled by arrogance, but coupled with intellectual limitations, frequently "steer too nigh the sands."

THE CONSPIRATORS

AFTER a late breakfast, the man from the Syndicate returned to his motel room, stretched out on the bed with a leisurely cigarette. He was using the name Marco on this assignment, and in conservative attire and modulated speech he might well have been a traveling business executive. Only a penetrating appraisal might have detected the subtly reined arrogance, the habitually calculating glint in bleak gray eyes.

As he smoked, Marco thumbed the pages of a small memo book. A series of entries had gradually



filled several leaves since his arrival in Sea Vista three weeks ago, and the last such notation was a list of four names: *Sheriff John*

Leahy; Dr. Phillip Rostock, Louis Stines, Warren Thatcher.

Marco's eyes mirrored taut satisfaction as he reviewed the pages. He'd gleaned his first inkling of a possible complot from the chance remarks of a luncheonette waitress in town, and diligently built upon his suspicions.

Abruptly, the Syndicate man stubbed his cigarette and arose. The local elections weren't until next week, but it could well be he had enough ammunition now.

The motel was on the southern outskirts of Sea Vista; for transportation since his arrival, Marco had rented a late model sedan in keeping with his assumed business status. He drove to town at a moderate pace.

The courthouse was a freshly-painted brick building on the town square, with the sheriff's office housed in a trim annex. Marco shouldered unceremoniously into the sheriff's sanctum, found Leahy alone, absorbed in paper work.

"The name's Marco, Sheriff," the Syndicate man announced, flashing a quick smile which did not reach his eyes. "I'd like a few minutes of your time."

Sheriff John Leahy was a lean man in his early fifties, with a mild, patient expression. If Marco's abrupt entrance irked him, he gave no evidence, merely nodded pleas-

antly. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Marco; I've seen you around town." He indicated a chair beside his desk. "What can I do for you?"

Marco shot the sheriff a hard look, masking his scrutiny by firing a cigarette. Was this hick-lawman hinting at something with his observation bit? "I want to discuss a business proposition with you, Sheriff," he said directly.

The sheriff hiked one brow. "Business?"

"Correct." Marco brought back his humorless smile. "What you might term a mutually profitable association."

A fly settled on Leahy's arm; he brushed it aside with an idle wave. "This is a law enforcement office, Mr. Marco," he said.

Marco nodded. "That's why I'm here. My associates feel they can benefit from your services."

"Associates?"

The smile broadened. "Business partners, Sheriff. We want to bring new revenue to Sea Vista, expand your economy."

Leahy settled back in his chair, eyed Marco squarely. "Meaning . . . the Syndicate?"

Marco exhaled a plume of smoke. "That's right."

A tic pulsed in the sheriff's cheek; his mild expression suddenly stiffened. "No," he said emphatically.

Marco wasn't disturbed. "Relax, Sheriff," he said. "This won't be any flash deal. Just a nice, quiet operation you and your men can absorb with no sweat. First, a few slots; later, some discreet gambling spots. After that, some girls." His words were confident. "This is a vacation town, made to order for such a setup. We'll guarantee you, personally, five grand a year."

Leahy was having trouble breathing; the tic was riotous now. "Get out of here," he said shortly.

The Syndicate man stood up. It looked like this character was going to be difficult, but he'd give him one more chance. He said, "Ease off, Leahy. You don't understand what—"

The sheriff was struggling for control. "I understand all I want to," he returned heavily. "Ever since Sea Vista has begun to prosper, I've been expecting an approach from your kind. As long as I'm sheriff, you'll never get in here."

Marco held his tone even. "Maybe that won't be too long, Leahy."

The sheriff didn't blink. "Is that a threat?"

The Syndicate man's shrug was careless. "That's your word."

The fly was back again. This time Leahy did not brush it off, but diverted his attention sufficiently to smash it with one swift slap,

flick it to the floor. "My word, yes," he conceded, "but I don't scare, mister. I'll squash vermin like you without compunction. Now get out of here and out of town before I lock you up."

So that was how it was; the sheriff had a halo. Well, here was where the screws went in.

Marco permitted his lip to curl. "Big talk, Sheriff," he said. "Maybe you won't be so virtuous when the voters learn about your son and Rose Durand, and kick you out."

The sheriff had started to rise following his orders. Now, as the Syndicate man's words registered, he slowly resumed his seat, features again rigid. He licked his lips deliberately.

The Syndicate man relished his obvious bombshell. He'd scored! His theory, he was now positive, was no longer shrewd supposition but damning fact. True, on such a basis he could resume bargaining with Leahy on the spot, but why ease up? He held the whiplash now, could command more profitable final terms. Let the sheriff—and the others—sweat a little, sweat a lot.

Marco stood over Sheriff Leahy. "That's right; that's how it is," he said curtly. "I'll be at your home tonight, nine o'clock, to wrap it up." He turned then, strode out of the office. Leahy's somber gaze

followed him; the sheriff still did not speak.

Satisfaction rippled through Marco as he settled behind the wheel of his car. He'd play it the same way with the rest of them, starting with Dr. Phillip Rostock.

A pert nurse-secretary shook her head as Marco entered the office, identified himself. "I'm sorry. Dr. Rostock operates Tuesday mornings; he'll be at the hospital until noon, and then he has some personal contacts."

The Syndicate man frowned, annoyed at the development. "I'm not seeking the doctor's professional services," he said. "It's a private matter."

"Oh." The secretary consulted a pad at her elbow. "In that case, perhaps you might contact Doctor after he leaves the hospital. He'll be at a health stamp promotion with his father and the mayor at Town Hall at two, and at three the County Medical Association—"

Marco waved the secretary short. Actually, having his message relayed secondhand, with Rostock unable to appraise or rebut, could only leave the doctor uncertain, uneasily speculative. "I'm afraid I'll have to chance contacting him later," he said. Then he smiled casually as he added, "You might mention to Dr. Rostock that I wanted to talk to him about Rose

Durand." He watched her closely.

The secretary's gaze clouded. "Rose Durand?"

"That's right."

"But Rose Durand was killed in a car accident two months ago."

Marco nodded pleasantly. "I know," he said. He regarded the girl without further amplification for another moment, then quietly departed.

At the Security Trust, Marco's tack with Louis Stines, bank manager, was more blunt. "My name is Marco, Mr. Stines," he said. "What can you tell me about a girl by the name of Rose Durand?"

Stines was a heavy set man of about sixty-five, well-clothed, well-barbered. His gaze held steady under Marco's scrutiny. "Durand? I don't believe I place the name."

Marco nodded easily. "I'll refresh your memory," he said. "She was a loner and a drifter who worked part-time as a waitress in a luncheonette on Second Street and was killed in an automobile wreck two months ago." He eyed Stines closely. "Now—let me rephrase my question: what *will* you tell me about Rose Durand?"

Color tinged Stines' close shaven cheeks. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I've already told you," the Syndicate man said, "but the name's not important. Unless you want to

confirm it with your Sheriff Leahy."

The banker swallowed; tiny globules of perspiration, Marco was gratified to note, began to dot his hairline. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're intimating," he countered.

"You're sure?"

"I'm . . . sure."

Marco's gratification grew; the man was already shaken. "Then I suggest you get on with that confirmation," he said. "Under the circumstances, I won't take up any more of your time. Good morning."

Three down, one to go. Marco's lips quirked into a smug grin as he left the bank, drove to his last destination.

The Thatcher Mortuary was a modest establishment on the east side of town. Warren Thatcher, a slight, bespectacled man somberly dressed in accordance with his profession, ushered Marco into his private office. "Sit down, sir. I trust I may be of service."

Marco disdained the chair. "I'm sure you can," he said pointedly. "I'd venture discreet service—such as you provided in the Bruce Leahy and Rose Durand affair—is your special pride."

Thatcher's gaze narrowed. "I beg your pardon?"

"You remember them, of course? The sheriff's son, who worked at the bank, and that redheaded wai-

tress—both killed when their car went off the South Viaduct?"

The mortician shifted a pen-holder on his desk. "It was a—an unfortunate incident."

"But you were glad to go along with Sheriff Leahy and Dr. Rostock and Louis Stines?"

Thatcher's voice picked up an edge. "What do you mean? Who are you?"

"The name is Marco," the Syndicate man said. "I want your confirmation of everything that happened that night."

The mortician's mouth thinned. "Confirmation?"

"Exactly."

"I don't follow you."

"You don't?"

"No, I do not."

Marco all but laughed aloud. Thatcher was jolted, all right, his denial strained. But it was better to stop short, leave the mortician to his doubts.

"You're out of your depth now, Thatcher," Marco said abruptly. Then he turned, left the mortuary.

Driving back to the motel, the Syndicate man stopped at a stationery shop for some wrapping paper, twine, and a roll of sealing tape. He felt a heady glow of accomplishment. Rostock, Stines, Thatcher—he'd put the heat to them all. He'd deliberately left his motivation vague, unspecified, but

under their misgivings and the pressure they, in turn, inevitably would bring to Leahy, the sheriff's capitulation was practically assured.

Marco had a sandwich and coffee in the snack bar adjoining the motel, then retired to his room to devote a half-hour to composing two pages of closely written script, folding the pages around the memo book he'd reviewed earlier, then wrapping, tying and sealing the whole package securely. Tamper proof, he addressed the packet, again drove into town to the post office.

"First class, registered," he told the clerk.

"Yes, sir," the young man said, briskly handling the package and giving Marco his receipt. The Syndicate man pocketed the slip, well-satisfied. In point of fact, he considered his action practically unnecessary. Still, it was a precautionary ploy he couldn't overlook. Careful to avoid possible arrest for carrying a concealed weapon during his preliminary investigation, he'd worn no gun on this assignment. That meant he conceivably could be vulnerable tonight. But with that packet in the mail, regardless of any personal failure, the Syndicate's Sea Vista operation would be virtually cemented.

Not that there was much likelihood of his failure, once Leahy

fully understood how many aces Marco held, how badly the others would be smeared.

Indeed, the sheriff showed no sign of opposition when he admitted Marco to his home a few minutes past nine, led him into a neat livingroom off the main hall. Leahy's expression was rigid; he eyed the Syndicate man with grim stolidity.

Marco settled in a comfortable chair. "Come to a decision, Sheriff?"

Leahy remained on his feet. "I could have," he said.

The Syndicate man grinned. "Maybe some of your—ah—friends helped you make up your mind?"

"I've heard from them."

"I thought you would." Marco gave Leahy a calculating look. "Then you're coming in with us?"

"I didn't say that."

Marco straightened. "Just what are you saying, Sheriff?"

Leahy met the Syndicate man's stare. "That depends."

Marco's tone hardened. "You're hoping I'm bluffing, Leahy, but I'm not," he said. "I knew you'd buck me; that's why I took my time for a week or so, asked questions, looked for anything I might use before I dealt myself in." He paused. "I got lucky, drew some nice cards."

"Such as?"



"To open, such as your son Bruce—killed in an automobile crash two months ago." Marco stopped again, watching Leahy.

Muscle ridged along the sheriff's jawline. "You still haven't said anything," he said.

Marco's close look held. "The fact that Rostock, Stines and Thatcher contacted you, the fact that right now they're close to the panic button, says it for me."

The sheriff drew a deep breath. "Words, Marco."

The Syndicate man shook his head. "Facts," he corrected. "Sure, I was fishing blind at first. But then, like I said, I got lucky. A waitress I'd squired around some after hours had worked with a part-time girl named Rose Durand; she happened to mention some things the Durand girl had said one night after a few drinks. My informant didn't attribute anything special to what Rose Durand had told her, but I thought there might be, so I fished a little deeper. I learned Rose and your son Bruce had been doing a bit. They played it sly; few people knew about it. But Rose was a shrewd girl who'd been around, knew how to fire up a man. And Bruce worked at the bank . . ."

Leahy's hands clenched, unclenched. "Bruce merely took her out a few times. That's all he was

doing on the night of the accident."

This stupid character was really playing it out! Marco made no attempt to mask his arrogance. "Come off it, Sheriff," he said. "Your kid had embezzled money from the bank, was skipping town with the girl. Afterward, in a neat little four-way pact, you managed to hush it up. Stines replaced the money. Thatcher shipped the girl's body to some distant relatives out-of-state. For his part, Rostock had no comment after he'd issued death-by-accident certificates. I'm betting he found Rose Durand pregnant."

The sheriff's voice was uneven. "You've no proof of any of that."

Marco pressed on. "No real proof, no. But I've been digging, checking on the actions of the four of you since that night; the way you've kept in touch, hung together; what you've said—and haven't said. I'm satisfied I've got the script basically right." He made a short gesture. "Whether I'm off a bit is incidental, Sheriff. Once the voters learn the basic truth, you're washed up in this town."

For a long moment, Leahy made no rejoinder, merely looked at the Syndicate man flatly. Then he moved, fully opened a half-closed door admitting to a small study. "You heard him," he said to the

three men who advanced from the adjoining room.

So they'd all come arunning! Triumph-glinted in Marco's gaze as he passed over Stines and Thatcher to address Dr. Phillip Rostock. "I was right about the girl's condition, wasn't I, Doc?"

Rostock was younger than the rest, a muscular man in his late thirties. "That's something you'll never know," he answered bluntly.

There was a hint of ambiguity to the reply which irked Marco; he'd take this cocky sawbones down a couple of notches fast. "Back off, Doc," he said. "You could be just as finished as Leahy."

Rostock exchanged a brief glance with the sheriff; it was evident that for the moment, at least, he would speak for his associates. "We had a serious discussion before you arrived, Marco," he told the Syndicate man. "We agreed that if it proved necessary—for us *and* the town—nobody would be finished except you."

Was the ambiguity less? Marco grinned at the physician; if that was a subtle threat, he'd have these jokers spell it out. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

Rostock's look was direct. "We all still feel we committed no real crime, but perhaps we were wrong, acting along the line you've surmised," he said. "Perhaps the

townsfolk wouldn't have called for Sheriff Leahy's resignation. But scandal bites deep, stampedes some people. At the time, we felt we couldn't risk that. John Leahy had kept Sea Vista fundamentally clean, lawful. Bruce Leahy had gone wrong, but he'd paid the penalty, permanently; and we didn't want his father possibly being forced out of office as an aftermath."

The doctor paused, then added quietly, "We still don't want it. That's why we've reached a decision."

Marco maintained his grin. It was time to get this righteous quartet squared away. "Forget whatever you're intimating, Doc," he countered easily. "I didn't come into this hand without a hole card. The whole bit about your cover-up, all the facts I've verified, are in the mail right now to my chief. The Combine won't need me personally to tell them how to use that information. They'll crucify all four of you, and Sea Vista will be wide open within a month."

Sheriff Leahy shook his head. "You could be bluffing, but we know you're not," he took up the rebuttal. "Even so, removing matter from the mails ordinarily requires special authorization, but after your visit this morning I thought you might be shrewd enough to back yourself up. I de-

cided we might have to take some unorthodox action." The sheriff withdrew from his pocket the Syndicate man's sealed package. "That is why I alerted our postmaster for a possible special mailing. Spotting this wasn't too difficult; it was the town's only registered posting today." Leahy stopped, then finished quietly, "That's one 'fact' you overlooked, Marco. Our postmaster is Dr. Rostock's father."

Marco goggled at the packet in the sheriff's hands, some recollection of the doctor's secretary's words numbing him. He should have picked up the inference, checked it out. A chill traced his spine but he steeled himself against it. These characters weren't snowing him! He managed to return Leahy's solemn gaze. "So I . . . just disappear."

"You might put it that way. At his establishment, Thatcher can make suitable arrangements."

The Syndicate man forced a sneer. "Bluff, Leahy. None of you would go that far and you know it."

The sheriff's tone was grim. "I told you how I felt about squashing vermin. My friends agree with me."

The chill returned, icier now. Marco's lips suddenly were dry. "You'd never get away with it!" he blurted.

"We believe we will," Leahy said without emotion.

"You won't! That package aside, if I don't return, my Combine will send another man down here!"

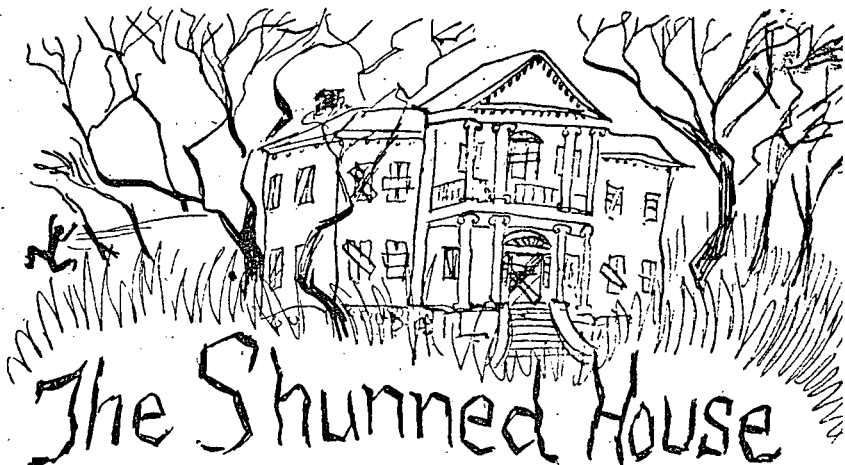
Stines' nod was sober. "That's quite possible," he interjected, "but a new man just might not come up with that 'script'," the banker traded a look with Thatcher, "and you won't be available to help him."

They *were* committed, all four of them. "Y-you won't get away with it, I tell you!" Marco stammered. "You can't—"

And then the Syndicate man broke off as the four citizens of Sea Vista suddenly closed in, gripping his arms firmly. His temples pounded and his knees buckled. There was nothing he could do now—nothing at all.



History may make man wise, yet opportunity to utilize that knowledge is often afforded by Chance.



The Shunned House

THE abandoned Yost house has stood in shunned isolation for nearly two hundred years. Like some dead thing left over from the Silurian ending and waiting abjectly for eternity, it stands deep in the tanglewoods not far from Oneida Lake.

Local superstition has always claimed that it is haunted, but some of our more modern wag-gish minds refer to it as a "sick house". One way or the other, hardly anyone ever goes near it, children live in dread of it, and Hon Schuyler has repeatedly said

that even the foxes and rabbits shun its vicinity.

Built by Hans Yost in 1768, it followed the popular colonial lines—the enormous peaked roof with

two stories and dormerless attic; the usual Georgian doorway and Ionic pilasters. Yost and his family enjoyed their sturdy home for seven years; then, when the Revolutionary War began, they fled to Albany to escape the Indian raids. They never returned.

Two years later when Sillinger led Burgoyne's right wing in a flank attack against the Mohawk Valley, his quartermaster appropriated the deserted mansion for a supply dump. And that was what gave rise to the legend of Sillinger's Gold.

Benedict Arnold routed the British commander and his army with a classic stratagem and sent them packing in a panic. They departed in such an hysteria of haste that they left the quartermaster and his men behind, and that night a gang of drunken Continentals and their Seneca allies surrounded the Yost house and proceeded to massacre the handful of Britons.

It was a very sorry affair. The British were unarmed and tried to surrender, but the savages wanted scalps and the Continentals were too drunk to care. You listen to the old wives' tales around these parts and you'll begin to believe that on certain nights when the wind moans from the northwest you can still hear the piteous cries of Sillinger's quartermaster and his

men wailing for mercy in the lonely woods.

But old wives or not, the legend of Sillinger's Gold was based on a foundation of fairly firm facts. Everyone knew that a British army in those days traveled on sterling which was entrusted to the quartermaster's keeping. Obviously neither he nor any of his men had escaped with the cash, and the Continentals and Indians who had massacred them and commandeered their supplies had uncovered no evidence of it; so what had become of Sillinger's Gold?

"It is still there," said the old wives and the old men and the young children. "Still out there in the woods in the old Yost house, guarded by the ghosts of Sillinger's murdered men. Listen! Hear it? Hear their cries in the wind?"

When I was a young boy there were times, at night, I swore I could hear their cries. And once, when I was eleven, I was certain that I heard more than a ghostly cry. I was positive I had heard the crunching chop of a tomahawk. That was the day I entered the forbidding old mansion for the first time.

My best pal Joe Turpin and his sister Gert and I had gone fishing in the creek along Yost woods; but they weren't biting

that day and we didn't know what to do with ourselves until Joe made the foolish suggestion, "Let's go take a peek at that old Yost house."

"Well . . ." I said doubtfully.

Gert slapped a hand to her mouth and looked big-eyed at us. "Oh, we don't dare!" she said in a stagy whisper.

It must have been her presence that prompted me. She was ten, had honey-colored hair and a pug-nose, and I thought she was beautiful. Joe thought she was a pain so I never told him how I felt about her. I wasn't actually sure just what I felt, but I was downright convinced that I had to show off in front of her.

"Why not?" I said. "I don't give a hoot about those old ghosts."

So we went. I led the way into the tanglewood, all thicketty with witch hobble and devilclub and grotesque oaks, thinking I must look something like the fearless Henry Stanley when he set out to find Dr. Livingstone in the wilds of Africa.

Suddenly we caught our first glimpse of the stark house through the interlacing of gnarled old trees. Tall grass and weirdly misshapen weeds grew in the long neglected yard, and all at once the morbid strangeness of this sinister vegetation and the eldritch atmosphere of the dilapidated

house struck all three of us like a slap and we stopped dead in our tracks.

"What're you stopping for?" Joe asked me, nervously.

"What're you?"

"Well, the old windows are all boarded up. We can't get in."

I was secretly relieved, but I felt I had to give Gert further evidence of my daring. I said, "Well, that old cellar there is open. C'mon, let's look."

The storm doors on the cellar stairs had long since fallen in, and we stood in the weedy yard and stared down into the quiet black pit.

"Betcha a dime you don't dare go down there alone," Joe said.

I didn't have a dime to bet and I didn't want one that badly, but Gert was still goggle-eyeing me and whispering, "Oooh don't, Phil! You dasn't." So I had to.

"You're on," I muttered, and I started down the old mossy stone steps with my fists clenched and with my heart booming in my ears.

It was a vast cobwebby place, lighted only by the small broken panes of windows which peered in from the upper ground level, and filled with a massed wreckage of decaying chests, stave-sprung kegs and things like spinning wheels which twenty decades of

deposit had shrouded and festooned into monstrous shapes.

The cool still air had a dank noxious odor, and ghastly looking pale fungous growths were in the hard earth floor. Hundreds of them had rotted and turned slightly phosphorescent, and they glowed like witch fire, while all around them on the damp dark earth was a cloudy whitish pattern of mold.

I was only there a moment, only long enough to take a fearful look around. Then I heard something go *t-chok*.

It was a small echoing sound and it seemed to come out of a hollow distance, out of that awful clammy earth. A moment later it went *t-chok* again, and all I could think of was those long-ago tomahawks splitting the skulls of Silinger's screaming men.

Then I was long gone too, back up the squelchy steps and through the opening and into the bright fresh day, past my two gawk-faced friends and running, running fit to bust a lung, straight for the woods, with Joe and Gert right after me, Joe yelling and Gert emitting little gaspy shrieks and me shouting back at them.

"I heard 'em! I heard 'em tommyhawking each other!"

We didn't stop running till we reached the creek, where we threw

ourselves on the pebbly shore and lay there to let our wind catch up to our bodies. About then a gun went *plamm* somewhere downstream.

"Must be Hon Schuyler," Joe gasped.

It was. He came tramping along in a couple of minutes, with his gun over his shoulder and a dead rabbit tied to his belt. Hon was about twenty-four at that time, a rangy, tanned, energetic cuss who wasn't very book-bright because he had never gone in much for schooling. But he was a wizard in the woods, and would have made a fine Indian scout had there still been a use for such an anachronism.



"Was that you kids I hearn yelling in the woods?" he asked, grinning at us. "You flushed this hare right acrost my path."

"Phil saw the ghosts in the Yost house, Hon!" Gert told him.

"I didn't say I saw 'em," I said. "But I heard something."

Hon told us to wait there, and he went into the woods toward the Yost house. He was back in about twenty minutes and said that all he had seen or heard were rats.

"You kids better stay away from that old dump," he admonished us. "Most of those old timbers and boards are so rotten they're like to fall in at any minute. I know your dad would sure light up if he heard you was fooling around there, Phil."

That was the truth. My dad was the sheriff, and he often said the county ought to tear down the Yost house before some kid broke his fool neck playing there.

"I don't aim to tell him," I said, "if nobody else does."

Hon grinned at me. "Okay. Let's just keep it a secret among the four of us. But after this, find a safer place to play."

Joe and I didn't return to the Yost house until we were fifteen, and we wouldn't have gone then if it hadn't been for Harold Edmonds.

He was a new boy who had

moved from New York City and he thought he was something special. Joe and I didn't like him much. He was always putting on airs about what a grand place the city was and sort of making us feel like a couple of country bumpkins.

So one day we said to him, "Yeah, but you don't have a two hundred year old haunted house in the city."

That interested him and he wanted to know all about it, so we told him the story of the massacre and Sillinger's lost gold. Harold scoffed and said it was just a granny tale to frighten little kids. He said to me, "You don't really believe you heard a tomahawk, do you? I mean, *really*?"

"Well," I said defensively, "I don't know what it was I heard. All I know is I heard *something* and it was somewhere in that cellar. You're so darn brave, why'n't you go in there and look for yourself?"

"Sure. I'm willing. But you'll have to show me where it is, if you've got the guts."

Well, we had to go back then because he had called us on it. We led him through the woods and across that weirdly vegetated yard and up to the pitlike cellar, and said, "Down there."

Harold kicked a loose pebble down the cellar steps and grinned.

"You two gonna come with me, or stay up here and hold hands?"

I didn't look at Joe, but I suppose he must have felt the same way I did. I would be doubly darned if I'd let that smart city boy put me down. I shouldered by him and led the way without a word.

It was still the same dank, humid cellar with the repulsive fungi growing out of the dirt floor; yet somehow its nameless air of desolation didn't seem as sinister to me as it had the first time. I was there. There is a big difference in your mental approach to any situation between being eleven and being fifteen. Having two people with me made a difference too.

Joe showed a botanical interest in the fungous growths, which he called "corpse weeds". Harold wandered off into the darker recesses of the huge cellar on an inspection tour of his own. I had a half-believing mind on Sillinger's gold, so I waded into the wreckage of chests and barrels and broken-legged furniture, and gingerly pawed through moldy clots of old rotted clothes and other clammy shapeless things which long ago must have been discarded to the cellar by the Yost family.

I had burrowed down to an old decaying chest which had some letters engraved on its side, and

had rubbed off enough of the grime with the heel of my hand to read *St. Leg*— when Harold called out.

"Hey you guys, look here! There's a secret passage behind these shelves."

Joe and I went down to the north end of the cellar where Harold was standing with a lighted kitchen match. A tall case leaned wearily away from the cobble wall, and just behind it was a narrow five-foot-high opening. The fluttering match flame showed us earthen walls ribbed with thick oak studs and timber beams.

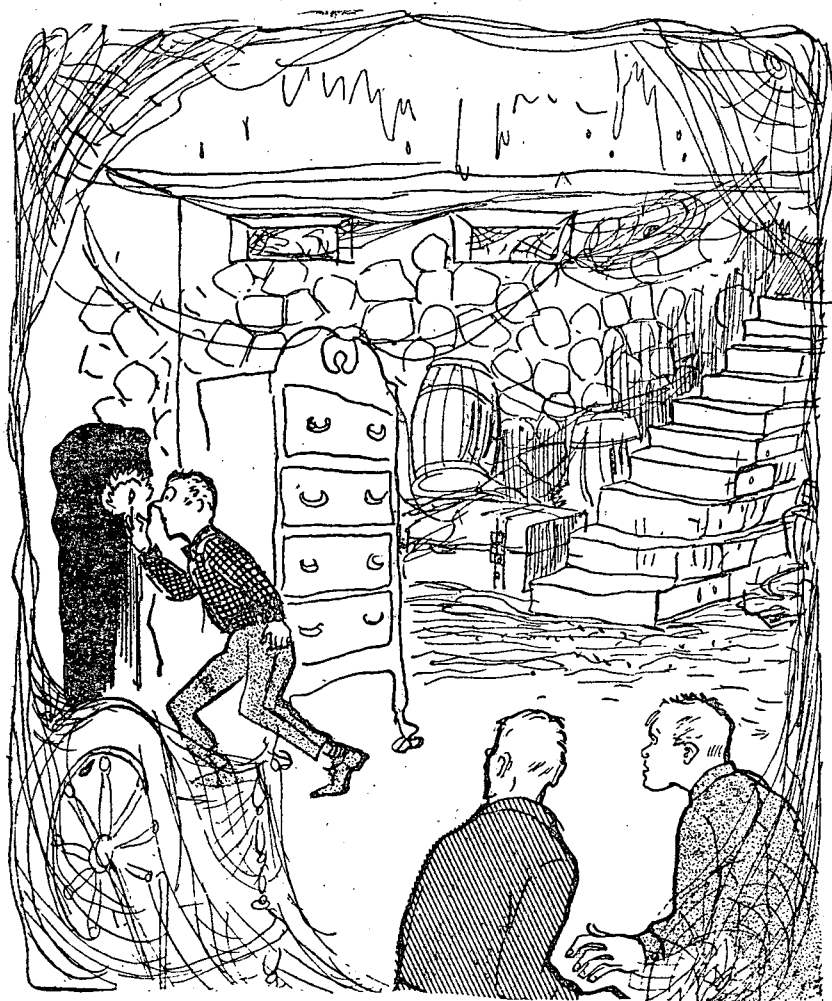
"Must be the escape tunnel," Joe said.

"What's that?" Harold asked.

"Don't you know anything? Folks used to build 'em under their houses years ago in case of an Indian attack. If they couldn't fight off the redskins from the house, then they'd use their escape tunnel and come out somewhere in the woods behind the Indians and get off with their scalps."

"I wonder where this one goes?" Harold said, peering into the dark claustrophobia-breeding tunnel. "What say we follow it? I've got plenty of matches."

Joe and I didn't know where the spooky hole in the wall went, and we didn't want to know. According to legend, a few of the quartermaster's men had tried to



flee through the tunnel on the night of the massacre, but the Continentals who had surrounded the house were local boys who knew

about the secret passage, and some of them had been waiting in the woods at its issue. They had driven the redcoats back into the tun-

nel with their bayonets, back into the tomahawks of the drunken howling Indians.

"Uh-huh," I said. "Most of these old tunnels aren't safe. The timbers are all rotten and liable to cave in."

Harold grinned that infuriating grin of his at me. "No guts, huh?" You two would make a fine pair of girls."

"Go ahead, big man," I snapped at him. "Let's see you go through it."

"Think I won't? Watch me."

We watched him edge around the sagging old case, bend down and enter the crowding tunnel, the match in his hand casting a spastic orange light on the crumbling dirt walls. The light drew away from us, growing smaller, smaller, and then it was gone.

Joe and I fooled around in the cellar for another twenty minutes waiting for him to come back; but he didn't, so we decided to leave.

"That big city jerk probably thinks he's pulling a fast one on us," Joe said. "He's probably hiding in the woods to see if he can scare us. Let's get out of here."

I was ready. The dust and cobwebs were beginning to give me an unhealthy feeling. I had the sensation that my clothes and skin were turning clammy and that I was wholly unclean.

We went outside and started beating the bush for Harold, tramping through the woods, searching, calling his name, for three hours. By then dusk was hurrying through the trees, and we turned toward home. Joe kept insisting that Harold had played a trick on us, that he was at home that very moment laughing at us, knowing we would be running around in circles in the woods looking for him.

I wasn't so sure. I had that morbid feeling of something gone wrong, and I didn't quite know what to do about it. I phoned Harold's parents as soon as I reached home. They were already in a state of anxiety so I had to tell them what had happened. I didn't tell them we had last seen Harold in the Yost house; I just implied that we had lost track of him in the woods.

My father organized a search party that night, and a whole raft of men and teenage boys began to scour the woods with lanterns and flashlights. I went along with them. Hon Schuyler was one of us, of course, because he knew those woods coming and going; around nine o'clock I had a chance to speak to him alone, and I told him about Harold going into the escape tunnel.

Hon growled, "Ain't you kids

been warned again and again to stay clear of that old house?"

"I know, Hon, but he insisted. You think he might have been caught in a cave-in?"

"Could be, but no sense in getting the rest of 'em riled up about it till we know for sure. I'll slip off and give a look."

The next day was a school day, and the men sent all us teenage boys packing for home at midnight. That was when I saw Hon again. He took me aside and told me he had been through the tunnel but hadn't found Harold.

"He come out into the woods all right," Hon said, "because I seen his footprints just inside the exit. But I lost 'em in the leaves. Anyhow, if I was you and Joe, I'd keep it under my hat about you boys going into the Yost house. You'll just get in Dutch with your old man if he learns."

"Sure," I said. "Joe and me won't say anything."

They found Harold Edmonds the next day. I mean they found his body. It was in the river and he had been drowned. There was a bump on the top of Harold's head, but the coroner figured it was probably caused by a tree stump or a boulder in the water.

The decade that followed Harold Edmonds' death went by like a

wind for me. I went away to college when I was eighteen, and after that I served my hitch in the army. I had just turned twenty-five when I finally returned home.

My dad was after me to get into the county district attorney's office to start some kind of political career for myself. Though I really didn't want the job, I decided to take it for a while because it would give me an opportunity to make certain contacts and to understand better the rather ambiguously defined legal aspects governing a certain private enterprise I had in mind.

I had been acting as the DA's man for almost a year when a second tragedy occurred in our town. My boyhood chum, Joe Turpin, was murdered.

Some kids found the body on the bank of the creek bordering the Yost woods. There was no doubt in our minds that it was murder, for Joe's throat had been sliced wide open and the wound had half decapitated him.

"Not a knife slash," the coroner said. "It was made by a broad-bladed instrument, and the blow was delivered in a straight thrust. Could have been an ax, or even a shovel."

I went to see Joe's sister, Gert. She had married a local man and Joe, who hadn't gotten around to

marriage himself, had been renting a room from them.

"Did Joe have any enemies you know of, Gert?"

"No, certainly not. Everyone around here had always liked Joe. You know that, Phil."

"Well, do you have any idea why he went into the woods yesterday? Was he going hunting or fishing or what?"

Grace looked down at her folded hands in her lap and shivered.

"It sounds awful when I think of it now; Joe told me he thought he would take a hike in the Yost woods and, just kidding, I said to him 'Better not go near the Yost house or the tomahawks will get you.' He laughed and said he just might look in there and see if he could find Sillinger's Gold."

She put a fist to her mouth and held it there, then started to cry softly, and I put my arm around her.

"And then," she sobbed. "and then that terrible thing happened to him, to his . . . just as if it really was . . ."

"All right, Gert," I said gently. "Try not to think about it now. Just leave it up to us. We'll get to the bottom of it."

I had an idea that I was already very close to the bottom of it. I went back to the office, got a .38 revolver, put it and a flashlight into

my pockets, and set off for the Yost house.

Nothing about the old house seemed to have changed. The weatherbeaten front door with its broken fanlight and wormy pediment was still standing, still tightly guarding its old guilty secrets. I plowed through the weeds and went down the cellar steps.

Splashing the flashlight over the moldy earthen floor, I went around the rotting remains of barrels, chests, and other ruined furniture, and followed the dripping stones of the north wall down to the decrepit case that guarded the tunnel. I paused at the burrowlike opening of the escape tunnel, listening.

T-chok . . . t-chok . . .

He was in there digging, as he had been for years. I smiled when I thought of all the countless hours he had spent looking for something that wasn't there. I squeezed behind the shelves, crouched down and started into the tunnel, moving ahead blindly and cautiously, seldom flashing my light for fear he might see it.

It was a horrific place. I felt like a mole burrowing into the infinitely abysmal earth. The quick shooting flickers I made with my flashlight shone eerily along the tunnel of caked loam that stretched and curved ahead, and showed me

shallow pocky holes all along the mildew-tainted hard earth floor where he had been digging.

A sudden bright glow illuminated one of the convolutions of the tunnel directly ahead of me. I stuffed my flashlight into my pocket and drew the .38, then moved up a few feet and peered around the turn in the tunnel.

A lantern was blazing on the ground, and Hon Schuyler was hunkering over it, digging at the dirt with a short-hafted shovel. I stepped into the light.

"I had a hunch it was you all along, Hon," I said.

His head shot up and he nearly clobbered himself on one of the low crossbeams. The up-flood of lantern light cast a demoniac glow over his tense wild-eyed face as he crouched in front of me, holding his shovel like a rifle at port arms. He licked his lips before he spoke.

"Too bad you had to butt into this, Phil."

"You mean because now you'll have to fix me like you did Harold Edmonds and Joe? How come you didn't try to make Joe's death look like an accident too?"

Hon grinned. "Because Joe wasn't as easy to handle as the Edmonds kid." He gave the shovel a significant heft. "I had to use this on Joe. I didn't want to, but what else could I do? He heard me

digging in here and caught me at it. I've spent too many years looking for Sillinger's gold to share it with anybody, Phil. And I'm close to it now, hear? I *know* I am."

"No," I said, "you're not."

"Whatta you mean, I'm not! It's got to be in this tunnel. I've ransacked through the rest of the house dozens of times and I know it ain't there. The quartermaster's men came through here the night of the massacre, didn't they? But when they seen they couldn't get out they must've buried the gold here somewhere."

"No, Hon. It's gone. It's been gone for years."

His eyes went a little crazy. "You're lying! You're trying to trick me! You want it for yourself!"

I opened my mouth to tell him, but he never gave me the chance. He took a sudden vicious broad-stroke with his shovel at the .38 in my hand. I sprang back, banging my spine and head shockingly on a stud and beam, and didn't even have a chance to raise the gun as he came bounding toward me with that damned square-bladed shovel leveled for a slicing thrust at my throat. I simply fired point-blank from the hip.

The .38 made an explosion that must have echoed all through the

bowels of the earth, and I cringed, expecting the tunnel to cave in. Crumbling dirt rained on my bowed back, but the old timbers held, and when the smoke cleared I saw Hon on his back with his head by the lantern. He didn't seem to realize he had been shot.

"It—it *is* here, I know it is," he gasped. "Once I—I even found a couple of old sovereigns right here in the tunnel."

I crouched beside him. His eyes had a queer glassy look.

"They probably dropped out of Sillinger's chest when I started to lug it through here ten years ago, Hon. It was all decayed and coming apart. I was afraid you might be hanging around outside, so I intended to use the tunnel to get into the woods; but I didn't have the nerve then to go all the way through. I finally took a chance and hauled it up to the yard."

Hon was trying to see me but his eyes kept going out of focus.

"You—you—"

"Yes. I've had the gold hidden in the woods ever since I was fifteen. I couldn't decide what to do

with it because the treasure trove laws are so vague I was afraid I might have to forfeit half of it to the state. But a couple of months ago I found a man who will take it off my hands at a fair price, and no questions asked."

"Lying—you're lying!"

"It's the truth, Hon. I found it in the cellar the day you killed the Edmonds boy. Joe didn't notice it, so I kept my mouth shut and came back for it the next day while everybody was looking for young Edmonds. It had been right there in the cellar ever since 1777, shoved in amidst that heap of junk. It even had his name on it."

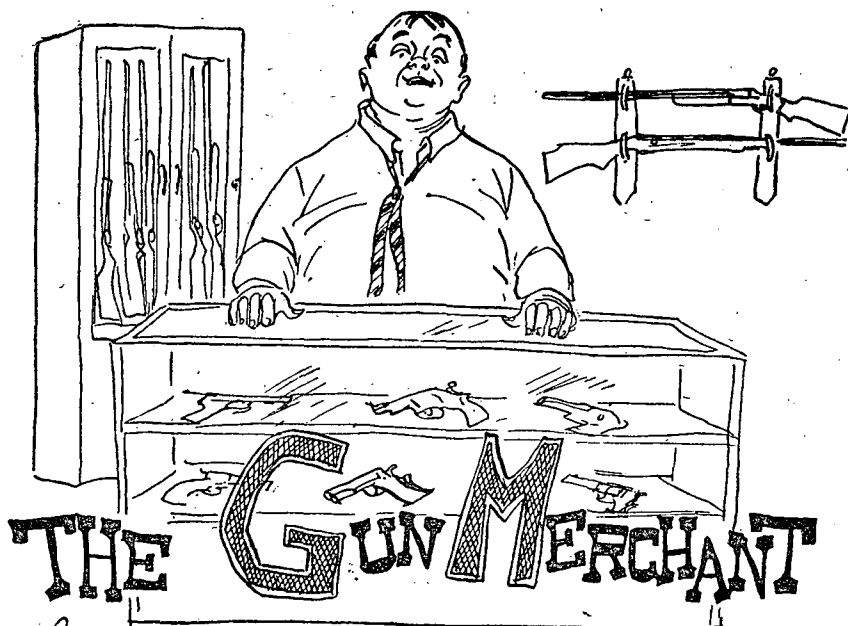
"No!" Hon's voice croaked. "I—I pawed through all that junk years ago. There wasn't any chest with Sillinger's name. Just old clothes and—"

"You should have gone to school longer, Hon. We learned in the eighth grade that 'Sillinger' is only a local contraction of his proper name: Barry St. Leger."

But the information came too late for Hon. He no longer had a care in this world.



The successful salesman is one who knows intuitively when to speak and when to be silent.



By
F. J. Smith

It was an unusually hot day. Not a breath of air moved, not a leaf fluttered. The air was heavy and oppressive; it hung like haze, supporting the stink of auto exhaust that outraged the nostrils and made the eyes smart.

Will Smallwood had just returned from Fred's air-conditioned diner where he had consumed a hearty noonday meal, and now he sat in his chair near the front of the store with the fan blowing on him. He was a short-legged man, very big around the waist, with bulging vein-streaked eyes and a full lower lip. His lifeless red hair, what there was of it, was plastered flat to his

scalp as if it had been glued there. Fingers laced together over his stomach, his head had fallen forward. He was neither fully asleep nor fully awake, but in an in-between state, vaguely aware of the sounds out on the street yet unaffected by them.

Will was in this semi-stupefied condition when the man came into the store. He stirred uneasily and opened his eyes. In spite of the heat the man wore a dark summer suit, a white shirt and a necktie, and he carried a black suitcase. Will sized him up in a glance—a salesman. It was no kind of a day to be pestered by salesmen.

"What will it be?" he asked in a tone that lacked even the faintest degree of encouragement.

"I'd like to buy something."

Will's eyes opened wider, as if the man had spoken a magic word. "Certainly. Of course." He raised himself out of his chair, instantly the obliging and hopeful proprietor of the small, cluttered establishment known as Smallwood's Sporting Goods Shop. "A fishing rod, maybe? A nice set of golf clubs?"

"I want a gun."

Will led the way to the rear of the store and moved efficiently behind a glass display case. Placing his hands on top he smiled and said, "Something along the line of a pistol?"

"Yes. That's what I'd like."

"You've come to the right place," Will said with pride. "If you can't find what you want here, you won't find it nowhere."

"That's what I thought," the man said. He studied the guns, all arranged enticingly under glass, while Will looked on, wondering why in the world he wanted a gun. Maybe he was going on a trip and felt he needed protection. Maybe he wanted some target practice in the back yard. Maybe, for all anyone knew, he intended to hold up a bank. Will considered the thought and smiled to himself. He didn't look like the kind of a man who would do a thing like that, but looks could be deceiving.

Will mopped at his sweat-shiny forehead with the back of his sleeve and blew out his breath. "It's a hot day. Man, it's hot."

The man looked up, then lowered his eyes again. It appeared to Will that this man wasn't the talkative kind. It was always a good idea to get customers to talk, to put them at ease, to gain their confidence. There were tricks to selling and Will knew them all.

"It's the kind of weather knocks a man out," he said with a grunting laugh. "Especially overweight people. They feel it the most."

"Do they?"

"No doubt about it. My wife,

Mina, is big too; big all around." He extended his hands. "Like this. She likes to eat and I keep telling her to cut down on the chow, but it's like talking to a stone wall."

The man tapped the top of the counter as if he hadn't heard a single word of Will's genial dissertation. "That one. The automatic. Let me see it."

Will opened the showcase and took out the gun. "Army surplus," he said, handing it to the man. "I can give you a good price on it."

"You mean the army no longer has need of these guns? Is that it?"

"Who knows what the army needs?" Will said, shrugging his shoulders so that his head almost disappeared between them. "Who knows what's going on?"

The man pressed the clip release button and the empty clip popped out, dropping into his open palm. He pulled back the slide and let it snap forward again, and Will could tell just by watching him that he was familiar with firearms.

"It has a nice feel, hasn't it?"

"You have ammunition?"

"Plenty! Tons of it."

He reached into the display case again, brought out a box of forty-five caliber shells and placed them on the counter. The man opened the box, counted out five and carefully inserted them into the empty clip. He pushed the loaded clip

back into the stock and raised the gun, pointing it toward the ceiling. Slowly he brought his arm back down and aimed directly at Will's head. Will's eyes almost popped out and the man looked at him with something like amusement, as if it were all part of a practical joke.

Will didn't think it was funny. His hand shot out and he pushed the gun aside. "What's the matter with you!"

"What do you mean?"

"Ain't you got any sense?" Will growled at him. "Don't you know better than to point a loaded gun at a man's head?"

"Did you see me pull back the slide after I put the clip in?"

"Slide? Well—no."

"Then the gun couldn't have been loaded, could it? If I didn't pull back the slide there couldn't have been a shell in the chamber, could there?"

He said it as if he were reasoning with a small and not very intelligent child, and Will couldn't help but feel a little foolish.

"I guess maybe I got a little excited," he had to admit. "A man sees a gun pointing at him, he don't stop to think of all these things." For some strange reason he wanted to get rid of the man. There was something about him he didn't like, something that made him feel

very uneasy, yet he didn't want to risk the chance of losing the sale. It was a good profit item. "Have you decided?"

"No. I haven't quite made up my mind."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Will said earnestly. "Take the gun and I'll throw in the box of shells at half price."

"You're a very generous man." Again he raised the gun, holding it up like a soldier ready for inspection. He cocked back the trigger with his thumb and brought the gun down again, so that this time it pointed straight at Will's stomach. Before Will could open his mouth, the trigger clicked down with a sharp metallic sound that made him jump a foot.

"That's enough of that!" Will cried and made a grab for the gun.

The man drew his arm away. A faintly derisive smile appeared on his lips. "You're a nervous man, Mr. Smallwood. Nervous and excitable."

"Who wouldn't be nervous with a gun pointed at him? A gun is a dangerous instrument, not a toy. If you came here to play," he said with some indignation, "you came to the wrong place. Give me that gun!"

"I've decided I want to buy it."

"Oh, well that's different."

"But first I have a question to

ask. It's a very important one."

"What kind of a question?"

"Let's assume that after I've bought this gun I go home and use it to kill my wife—"

"Kill your wife!"

"Why, yes. Those things happen, don't they? Men have been known to kill their wives for one reason or another, haven't they?"

"Are you feeling all right?"

The man smiled again. "Well, let's put it this way, then. Supposing I use it to kill somebody I don't like, for instance. Would you disapprove of that? Would you sell it to me under those circumstances?"

"Please, give me back the gun and go home."

"Aren't you interested in selling it?"

"Why do you think I'm in business?"

"Then answer my question."

"All right! All right!" Will said, throwing up his hands in exasperation. "As far as I'm concerned I don't give a damn what you do with it. It's none of my business. Now, does that answer your question?"

"In a nutshell."

"Well, do you or don't you want it?"

"I'll take it."

Will picked up his salesbook and ballpoint pen. He leaned over the counter and started to write.

"Fifty-nine-fifty plus tax. . . ." He was still writing when the gun crashed down hard on the top of his head.

When Will Smallwood came to, he found himself tied to the straight-backed chair in the workshop behind the store. His arms were drawn behind him and his wrists bound tightly together. His ankles were tied to the legs of the chair and a length of rope was coiled about his stomach, holding him almost immovably to the chair. The man stood off to one side, leaning against the workbench and puffing calmly on a cigarette. As soon as he saw that Will was awake, he dropped the cigarette on the floor and ground it out with the toe of his shoe.

"I see you've come out of it," he said.

Will was not looking at the man now. His attention was fixed on the battle-scarred table where he sometimes sat and ate his lunch. It had been moved out from the wall and now it stood directly in front of him, not more than a few feet away. A wood box had been fastened to it with two steel clamps, but it was not the box that held Will spellbound; the box was only part of the device. The forty-five automatic had been secured to the box in such a way that its muzzle was aimed at Will's stomach. A

steel pin came up through a slot in the top of the box. The end of the pin was bent at a right angle and this offset had been inserted through the trigger guard so that it maintained pressure against the trigger.

"What do you think of it?" the man asked. "Rather ingenious, isn't it? It works beautifully, too. I've already tested it. Inside are an alarm clock, a battery and a solenoid. When the alarm goes off it will energize the solenoid, pulling back the pin against the trigger. There are four shells in the clip and one in the chamber. Naturally, the gun will fire five times in rapid succession."

Will looked at him, confused and frightened. "Why?" he blurted. "Why do you want to do a thing like this to me?"

"Do you read the papers?"

Will nodded his head, and the man went on in a stinging, bitter voice. "In that case you know a girl was killed some weeks ago. She was assaulted first, and then shot by two young hoodlums. The girl was my daughter."

"But what's that got to do with me?"

"The gun was bought in this store."

Will swallowed hard. "You can't hold me responsible for what two young punks do. How did I know

they were going to shoot some—”

“Would it have made any difference if you had?”

“Of course it would. All the difference in the world. You don't think—”

“It didn't seem to a while ago.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“When I suggested I might want to use that gun to commit murder.”

Will forced a smile to his lips. “I knew you didn't mean that.”

“How did you know?”

“A man like you doesn't go around killing people.”

“How do you know what kind of a man I am?”

“Mister, listen to reason,” Will begged. “I sympathize with you. Believe me, I do. But you can't blame me for what happened. You can't hold me responsible. If you've got to blame anybody, blame the phoney politicians who make it so easy for punks to buy guns, and the soft-hearted judges that are always feeling so sorry for these criminals. Those are the ones to blame. I'm just a man trying to make a living.”

“And out for a quick dollar.”

“Look, killing me isn't going to solve anything. It won't change a thing,” Will said hurriedly. “You'll only end up getting yourself in trouble, maybe spending the rest of your life in prison. Be reasonable.

Let me go and I'll forget the whole matter. I'll forget everything that's happened here today.”

Without another word the man bent over the suitcase that lay open on the floor and took out a roll of adhesive tape. He tore off a length. Will was still trying to plead with him when he slapped it over his mouth. He tore off two more pieces and did the same thing, so that now the whole bottom part of Will's face was covered with adhesive tape. It was all he could do to make a sound. The man stepped back and looked at him. Satisfied, he dropped the rest of the roll into the suitcase, closed it, picked it up and started to walk toward the door. He stopped there and turned to Will for the last time. “I've taken the liberty of hanging the CLOSED sign in the front door. We want to make sure you won't be disturbed, don't we?”

As soon as he heard the front door close Will went to work in a desperate struggle to free himself. First, he tried to inch the chair away from the line of fire, but by turning his head from one side to the other and looking down he could see the two steel screw-eyes that had been driven into the wood floor, one on each side of the chair. Through these rope had been threaded and made fast to the rungs and legs of the chair. It was

impossible to do any more than rock the chair a little from side to side; to move it any appreciable distance was out of the question.

When he had convinced himself of this, Will tried to free his wrists, but the rope was strong and the knots well tied. He was puffing

hard from his efforts. With his mouth taped up it was difficult to breathe. His face turned purple. For a few agonizing minutes he went through the terrible sensations of a man suffocating.

After a while his breathing became normal, or near normal,



again. He was conscious now of the dreadful throbbing pain in his head where the gun had struck him such a vicious blow, but he soon forgot that. Sitting there, helpless as an animal caught in a trap, he found his eyes drawn to the gun. In the silent, stifling room, that now seemed like a tomb, he could hear the clock inside the box ticking off the seconds with ominous precision.

What time was the alarm set for? At what exact moment would the little black hole splatter out death?

Sweat streamed down Will's face. A steady river of it inched along his spine, soaking his shirt. An obstinate fly settled on the tip of his nose, working its legs and flapping its wings, then it made a wide, buzzing circle and came to rest on his cheek. Will made a grimace and the fly went zooming off toward the ceiling. Even in the face of imminent catastrophe these little things annoyed him.

With another vigorous burst of energy he assaulted the ropes again. They cut into his wrists with exquisite pain, as tight as ever. He began to cry. Big tears rolled down his cheeks and mixed with the salty sweat. His whole body shook convulsively. He didn't want to die. Not like this, most of all; trussed up like a helpless animal, not even knowing when

death would come. Not when there was so much for which to live.

He turned his head as if to block out the frightful vision and his eyes fell on the workbench. It was only a couple of feet away. There were tools on top; a pocketknife, a pair of wire cutters—instruments that could sever the ropes with ease and set him free. But he was as powerless as a man dying of thirst, with water the other side of an insurmountable wall. And all the while the clock ticked.

The shop had one window, but it was closed. The man had seen to that. Covered with the accumulated grime of years, it faced on a narrow alley that few people ever used. And what if somebody did happen to walk past? What difference would it make? He couldn't cry out. He could make only a few blubbing sounds that couldn't possibly be heard outside. And he couldn't be seen, not unless somebody made a special effort to look inside. Again he turned his head and stared at the gun.

Dusk was falling when the phone rang. It continued to ring for a minute or more. Who was it? Mina? Yes, Mina! Who else at this time of the day? When he did not get home at a certain time, she always phoned. Mina was a worry wart. She'd call again.

Will's hopes soared mightily, then were dashed to earth again. Today was Wednesday. On Wednesdays Mina went to visit her mother and didn't return home until late evening. By then. . .

He tried to force his gaze away from the gun. His eyes moved to the ceiling, the floor, the small dirty window, and then they were drawn back to the table again, the box, the gun. The minutes slipped past; the clock ticked on, beating on his brain like an anvil being struck.

Darkness closed in around him. The sounds of the street died out. There was only the ticking clock. He could no longer see the gun, but it was there, etched in his mind. His eyes fixed on the spot with a glassy-eyed stare.

They found him later that evening. Mina had phoned the shop when she got home and then she had called the police. Two men came out in a squad car and forced open the front door.

One of the men loosened the steel clamps that held the box to the table. He turned it away, so

that it faced the wall, and then dismantled the whole contrivance while the other man cut the ropes that held Will to the chair. Even after the ropes were removed Will sat there, his eyes wide open and straight ahead.

The man shook him and said, "Snap out of it, Smallwood. You're okay. Smallwood!"

When Will did not move or speak, he turned to his partner and shrugged his shoulders. They both looked at Will and then at each other. The first man tapped the side of his head, and the other man nodded.

"I'd better call the ambulance, eh, Charlie?"

"Yeah, maybe you'd better."

He started to walk away when Charlie, who had removed the top of the box, called to him. "Get a load of this," he said. "Nothing inside but an old alarm clock. Not another thing."

"What about that, huh?" the other man said. "What about that?" Shaking his head, he went into the other room where the telephone stood behind the counter.



Ordinarily, idle gossip is to be shunned, but it has been known, on occasion, to perform a "community service".



WHEN Kathleen Hyland saw Alice Silvertooth coming up the front walk, she considered not answering the doorbell. Perhaps extra-sensory perception warned her that death can hide in the querulous voice of a neighborhood busybody.

"Alice must have some disagreeable gossip today, to be in such an eager hurry," Kathleen thought, looking out the livingroom win-

by
Aubrey S. Newman

dow of her waterfront home on Sunset Key. "But I hope she spares me unsavory details!"

The two-tone bell chimed and Kathleen stood a moment, undecided. Her livingroom was an antique collector's dream of mahogany, soft-woven fabrics, oil paintings, and porcelain bric-a-brac—not a piece of modern Florida furniture anywhere. It was a perfect showcase for Kathleen herself, in a soft gray dress which outlined her still slender figure. The single strand of matched pearls and bluish tint of carefully coiffured gray hair completed the overall effect of a beautiful Dresden china doll, filmed over with the indefinable patina of years.

But there was a youthful vigor in the purposeful way she stepped quickly to the door and opened it, flashing her peculiarly expressionless smile.

"Good morning, Alice," she said. "Come in and have a cup of coffee."

Alice Silvertooth was a tall woman, nearly six feet, stooped and thin. She looked down at Kathleen with what Henry Hyland called her tortured eagle expression—large black pupils in the center of gray eyes, hooded by little folds of flesh above the upper eyelids.

"Well, thank you, Kathleen. But

I can't stay long. So much to do."

As in past visits, Kathleen and Alice were soon seated in the breakfast room.

"I love this view," Alice said, letting those queer staring eyes rove over the green water and mangrove islands of Florasota Bay, as wavelets lapped endlessly at the oyster-encrusted seawall. The *Queen Mary*, as Henry Hyland called their twelve-foot aluminum fishing boat with its tiny put-put motor, bobbed gently at its cypress wood dock—and Alice had no idea she was about to light a time fuse that would turn the little boat into a deadly weapon.

Kathleen sipped her coffee. Actually, until now, she had never faced any challenge in the security of her marriage to a successful husband ten years older than she was. When that challenge came over a cup of coffee in her own immaculate home, however, it was the psychological spark which set off a violent chain reaction in the emotional turmoil she had been building up silently for weeks.

The approach of Kathleen's fiftieth birthday, now just ten days away, had been upsetting enough, especially when she noticed in her mirror the beginning of a lacelike network of lines around her eyes. Then, in the mounting mental disturbance some beautiful women

experience at such times, she discovered the first withering of skin around her neck. For days now she had been studying these relentless signs with increasing dismay.

She gave no thought to her exceptional physical well-being—body, arm and leg muscles smooth and rounded from daily swimming in the bay, and regular tending of her flowering hibiscus shrubs. Instead, her whole emotional being was coiled for an explosion against the inexorable footprints of time on her face, so she was really not listening while Alice Silvertooth talked about her “community service” as a volunteer worker in the Gift Shop of The Sunset Key Art Center.

Then Alice worked around to the business at hand, her “duty” to let Kathleen know about Henry and Isabel Sawtell.

“Kathleen,” she said, her tone carefully careless, “I see Henry at the Art Center every day, but you never come there.”

“No,” Kathleen said, absently touching the vivid petals of a Honolulu Lani hibiscus flower among the cluster of blooms on the table. “When Henry retired two years ago, we settled on Sunset Key to be near the Art Center so he could develop his painting hobby.

“My hobby is growing hibiscus,

and I belong to the Florida Hibiscus Society. We ride our hobbies separately—except we both like to fish. That’s why we have the *Queen Mary* out there at the dock.”

“Well,” Alice said, planting the seed of doubt like a poisoned stillette blade, “if my Alex were alive and taking art lessons from Isabel Sawtell, I’d sure be interested in his daily fascination with art, especially those private night lessons, in that skylighted Art Center studio!”

Kathleen’s finger tips closed suddenly on the petal of a thick textured Madonna hibiscus bloom, crushing it.

In a minute of tearing silence the single deftly planted stab of the skilled knifer did its deadly work. The first stunning shock was followed by spread of the insidious poison, and Kathleen failed to see the knowing cold fire in those hooded eyes as Alice studied the effect of her blow.

Like the matador who has killed often, Alice recognized this silent “moment of truth” in Kathleen’s mind and heart. Then, mission accomplished, Alice hurried on her way.

Kathleen sat alone, looking out over the bay, while her fingers reduced bright hibiscus petals to bloody pulp. Many things were falling into place in her mind, es-

pecially the unusual amount of time she now realized Henry had been spending in the Sunset Key Art Center these past two months. Also, Henry seemed to resent her friendship with Alice lately.

"Listen, Kathleen," he said only yesterday, "that woman is a trouble maker who spends her time mind-ing other people's business. There is no telling how much heartbreak her tale bearing has caused. Her name should be Malice, not Alice!"

"Was Henry trying to discount in advance anything Alice might say to me?" Kathleen wondered.

Suddenly she rose, went into their bedroom, sat down at the antique French vanity with two wing mirrors and studied her face. There *were* little wrinkles around her eyes, her neck *did* have that dry-skin look of age, and her cheeks *were* beginning to wither!

She thought, "Henry *is* at that dangerous age, he *is* handsome—and he's all I have!"

She looked again at her face, and it seemed to grow older as she watched. "Yes," she said in a whisper, "he is all I have left . . . now!"

Since her brother had died unexpectedly six months ago, Kathleen had no other living blood relative. But Henry had been quite successful before he retired, and could leave her well provided for,

so she had felt no particular sense of insecurity. Now, however, if Henry deserted her for a younger woman, all that would be changed.

By late afternoon Kathleen had regained her outward self-control but, inside, the new fear seethed. She knew that while Alice was a gossip, she never manufactured tales out of whole cloth. Thus, pushed by her mounting emotionally unbalanced dread, she decided to go to the Art Center.

The sprawling frame main building, with its surrounding cluster of craft shops and smaller painting studios, was deserted, because of the annual Art Festival that day in the nearby mainland city. But Kathleen was drawn as by a magnet to the skylighted studio.

As her heels made little clicking sounds coming up the steps and across the wood-floored porch, Kathleen sensed, rather than heard, hurried surreptitious movement in the large rear studio room. When she opened the door to the foyer and discussion room, Henry came out of the rear studio, carefully pulling the door closed behind him.

"Well, Kathleen," he said, coming across to meet her, "how did you find your way here?"

He bent to kiss her, which he seldom did in public, and Kathleen knew with a growing inner hysteria that he was flustered and ner-

vous. Why? Guilty conscience?

With a curious feeling of detachment she thought, "He could easily pass for forty-five with his slender figure, tanned and unlined face, those alive brown eyes, and full head of neatly brushed pepper-and-salt hair. Why, he is handsome! Any woman would want him!"

Aloud she said, "I thought I'd like to see what you are working on. May I look?"

"Sure, come on. Isabel is giving me a critique on my seascape."

When they entered the skylighted room, Isabel Sawtell stood beside an easel on which Henry's seascape rested. She looked flushed, and nervously raised one hand to her blonde tousled hair in woman's instinctive gesture.

Kathleen spoke with mechanical politeness to Isabel, one half of her mind pretending to listen to Isabel's comments about Henry's picture, the other half screaming silently to herself: "Henry finished that picture two months ago. Don't they think I know? Alice was right. I should have known. A thirty-six-year-old widow, vital and charming—and a sixty-year-old man who thinks young. He gets youth and a last fling at romance and passion; she gets my Henry and security for the future; and I get left out in the cold, alone!"

But it was when Kathleen's eyes focused on the wide arty studio couch in the corner, with its flamboyant batik covering, that her blood congealed. The screaming inside stopped, and she was suddenly calm and resolved. The covering was free of wrinkles, yet both of them tried to distract her attention from it.

Her inner frenzy gone, Kathleen's emotional torment was transformed into a cold realization of what she had to do. The solution was not the elimination of Isabel, because there could always be another woman. It had to be Henry.

"Do they think I'm blind?" she thought. "Let them believe they have me fooled. Keep everything normal. But she can't have him, and he can't have her!"

The ordeal in the studio eventually ended, everybody pleasant. Kathleen prepared dinner at home in a trance. She talked with Henry over coffee, as in a dream, her thoughts raging.

"It must be soon, before they can do anything. But how?"

Then, through the humming mist of her thoughts, she heard Henry say, "Look, Katy, it's such a nice moonlight night and the trout are running. Let's take the *Queen Mary* out in the bay and try those new lures."

Like the practiced routine for

coffee with Alice Silvertooth in the morning—was it only this morning?—they changed to their usual fishing togs of shorts, sport shirts, and tennis sneakers.

When the light aluminum boat headed out in the bay, pushed by the little put-put, Kathleen's sense of cold unreality deepened. Then she saw the leather belt around Henry's waist on the seat in front of her, with the fishing anchor on the bottom of the boat just behind him.

Kathleen stared at the simple homemade anchor, a ten-quart pail filled with cement in which a metal ring was set, to which a piece of nylon rope was attached. An iron hook was tied on the other end. Before dropping the anchor, this hook was passed through a small metal bracket bolted to one gunwale near the stern.

As Kathleen looked again from the hook to Henry's belt, where it was pulled away from his back slightly as he leaned forward, the way to do it was clear. She pushed the steering lever, changing direction of the boat slightly.

"Let's have a try at the deep water in the grouper hole, Henry," she said.

When she cut the motor to let the boat drift over the deep water, Henry cast out his lure. The bay was exceptionally calm, so that the

boat rocked almost imperceptibly. Moonlight made nearby things clearly visible, while the distance faded into a grayish night fog. Kathleen's senses made her acutely aware of these things, along with an unreal feeling of being adrift alone in a dream world.

What she was about to do seemed unreal too, but there was a strange compulsion about it also. Still under the drive of emotional turmoil, she did not hesitate.

With slow, sure movements she placed the emergency floating paddle where it would fall clear of the boat. Then she doubled the nylon anchor rope back on itself and looped it in a knot, thus shortening its length to a couple of feet.

Finally, taking the hook in her right hand and carefully planting her feet in the bottom of the boat, she leaned forward and deftly placed the hook under Henry's belt—at the same time rising and stepping on the left gunwale of the boat, suddenly upsetting it. As the right gunwale rose she grasped it and fell outward and backward into the water, thus turning the boat upside down in a single capsizing motion.

Henry barely had time to start a surprised shout, and was up to his neck in water when the right gunwale smashed down on his skull. With continued momentum

the gunwale cupped Henry's head under the boat and shoved down on his shoulder, pushing him deep below the surface—and he was gone. The silence now was broken only by slight clucking noises as disturbed water slapped at the inverted sides of the *Queen Mary*.

The light aluminum boat, with air chambers in bow and stern, floated like a raft. For Kathleen, a strong swimmer, it was easy to capture the drifting paddle and move the boat to a nearby sand bar. There she righted it and, when the put-put failed to start, paddled home to report the "accident" that happened when Henry stood up to land a big fish. He had been hit on the head by the gunwale when the boat flipped over, she said—but made quite a "mistake" in her idea of where it happened.

Then Kathleen collapsed in hysterics, requiring medical care.

On the third day Henry's body was found floating in the bay, with a bump on the head, and his belt broken. Friends were kind, especially Alice Silvertooth.

Alice, hooded eyes alive with pleasure in her community service, visited Kathleen every day the week after the funeral. Like most such harpies whose poison words blight the lives of others, Alice was unaware of her part in the

tragedy, was completely insentient.

On Kathleen's fiftieth birthday, Alice came over after breakfast to fix flowers in the house, "because, dear, some people are bringing you a wonderful birthday present."

The gift soon arrived, escorted by Mrs. Hortense Huddleston herself, president of The Sunset Key Art Center. Others came too, including Isabel Sawtell, art instructor.

They set up a folding easel in Kathleen's livingroom where she could see it in good light. Then Isabel placed a rectangular object on the easel.

Mrs. Hortense Huddleston dramatically unveiled it, saying, "This is Henry's fiftieth birthday present to you, Kathleen. Since he can not present it himself, we are proud to do it for him!"

Kathleen stared at the picture, then seemed to shrink back in her chair, a puzzled look in the aged doll expression on her face. There seemed something less than sane about the restless darting look in her eyes. She said nothing.

The picture was a beautiful life-sized portrait in oils of Kathleen, against a montage of many small scenes in subdued tones. It was, truly, a picture of the way every woman would like to look at fifty, the china blue eyes reflected as a man in love saw them—all set

against a background of memories the artist had shared with his subject; so many, so lovingly wrought, each with a special significance Kathleen understood.

"Mrs. Hyland," Isabel Sawtell said, "Mr. Hyland had planned this picture a long time. He was like a little boy, wanting to surprise you with it." Isabel paused to regain control of her voice, then continued. "That day you came to the studio, he looked out the window and saw you. His 'surprise' was about to be discovered. After telling me to 'get it out of sight, quick!' he went out to delay you.

"I barely had time to hide it under the batik covering of the studio couch, and get the seascape picture on his easel, when you walked in the door. Do you remember, Mrs. Hyland?"

Kathleen did not answer, looking positively withered, her blue eyes now gone lifeless.

Embarrassed, uncomprehending, they filed out quietly, leaving the glowing picture on the easel. More than a work of art . . . a work of love!

Only Alice Silvertooth remained, her tortured eagle eyes brooding. As Kathleen continued to stare at the lovingly fashioned picture, Alice became restless.

"Kathleen," she said, "you must start a new life. Since my Alex left

me, I've busied myself with community service—interest in and concern for others. You can do this too. Pick one thing that would benefit the community, and take pleasure in rendering this service."

At last Kathleen stirred, and her eyes came alive. She felt again the cold resolution she had when she looked at that smooth batik covering on the studio couch, and when she saw the anchor in the bottom of the boat. She knew with certainty what she had to do. Except, of course, the boat could not be used again. She must find another way, where there would be no blood.

The expression on Kathleen's face now did not resemble a Dresden doll, but was more like a china gargoyle—lips slightly parted, with an oddly blank look, as though she were seeing into the future.

"Yes, Alice, there is a community service I want to render Sunset Key," she said, as almost insane gray light flamed in her eyes, "and thus make it a better place to live. But I must first decide the best way to do it."

"I'm so glad, Kathleen," Alice said eagerly. "Will you tell me when you decide?"

"Yes, Alice," and Kathleen Hyland smiled for the first time since that fateful morning coffee visit. "You will be the first to know!"

One who is unable to find solace within the confines of his own heart may find communion with nature a source of consolation.

THE little girl could have been sleeping, so peacefully did she lie. Her eyes were closed, her straight blond hair cascading about her face. One foot was tucked under her, the other slightly bent. A small patent leather slipper with one

"There's a girl, a little girl, over in the woods and she won't wake up." He raised and lowered his arms as if they were parts of a robot. His walk was loosely coordinated, all of which had earned him his nickname.



strap lay nearby. Her dress was neat and reached almost to her knees. Dogwood petals lay all about her; one blossom in her hair looked as if it had been placed there. Nearby, were a bicycle and three library books.

Above her and looking down at her stood Melvin Tuttle, called by his friends "Limbo". Soon he took off and hurried down the path, known as "lovers lane", to his home on the edge of the woods. "Pa, Pa!" he shouted excitedly.

"What do you mean, won't wake up?"

"She won't talk to me. I touched her and said 'wake up little girl,' but she dint even move."

Albert Tuttle looked at his son. There were times that Limbo had spun tall tales to attract attention. In spite of his sixteen years, he had the mind of a seven-year-old. He had never caused his parents real trouble, but in the back of Mr. Tuttle's mind there was uneasiness. The retarded child he had

been given, Tuttle accepted as an act of God. "Someone has to take the unwhole children in this world," he would say. "Perhaps we were chosen because we have more patience than most people." Now he wondered if this God-given patience were to be tested again.

"Come, I'll go with you, Limbo. Probably she is just asleep. By this time, she may have awakened and gone home."

The father and son took off the short distance to the path which crossed diagonally the wooded area known as Jenkins woods. Limbo ran ahead of his father, then turned and, flopping his arms, said urgently, "Hurry, Pa. Hurry."

The distance was about a quarter of a mile and they were both out of breath when they reached the area where the little girl lay. Tuttle knelt down beside the child and put his hand on her wrist. It was cold, and there was no pulse. He looked up at Limbo, his body shaking, his face grey with shock. "She's dead," he said. "Limbo, did you have anything to do with this?"

"No, Pa, I dint. I dint do nothin'. Honest, Pa, I just found her right where she is. Don't look at me like that, Pa." His eyes were pleading. Limbo had tested his father's patience in the past and knew the look that indicated punishment was due.

Tuttle rose to his feet unsteadily. "You'd better be telling the truth," he said. "Now we've got to report this to the sheriff at once."

They hurried back the way they had come, this time with Mr. Tuttle leading the way. Limbo, trailing behind, was chattering repeatedly that he had touched her and told her to "Wake up, little girl, wake up."

Mr. Tuttle's face was grim. His heart ached for the little girl and for her family that would soon learn the tragedy that had befallen them. It ached for another reason too, for he knew that, guilty or not, his son would be blamed. It had always been this way. Since childhood, Limbo had been blamed for others getting hurt, things being stolen, and minor infractions of the law. He'd never had friends. Children derided him and used him in a fun-provoking way.

Now he waited for the fat, wobbly son with the watery blue eyes. He would defend him as he had always done, against the abuses that were piled upon him. As Limbo shuffled up to him, he put his arms about his shoulders and said, "No, son, I don't think you did it. I'll tell Sheriff Gruber my son couldn't do a beastly thing like that." With that, he tousled the dark curly hair that rarely saw a comb, and hoped he was right.

Mr. Tuttle telephoned the sheriff what they had seen.

"Don't touch anything. We'll be right over," the sheriff instructed.

As Tuttle hung up, he turned to his wife for the first time. She stood staring at him, fear and horror imprinted on her face, her body shaking. She was a plump woman with greying hair, much too old to be taken for the mother of a teen-age boy. She had been childless for years, then found herself pregnant at forty. "Limbo," she cried, "you didn't harm this girl, did you?"

"No, Ma, no. I told Pa I dint do nothin'. I saw her under the tree. She's pur-ty. You tell the sheriff I dint do it. I wunt do a thing to hurt her."

Mrs. Tuttle covered her face with her apron which was stained from the apple-butter she'd been making. Her shoulders sagged as she sobbed aloud. "God help us. This is too much to bear."

Sirens were heard, coming closer to the Tuttle house. Sheriff Gruber and his deputy were there in minutes after the call. Others followed in their cars. Nothing much, outside of an occasional fire, ever happened in Williamsport. The cars all pulled into the Tuttles' yard, five cars besides the sheriff's. No lawn to ruin here. The earth was compact with clumps of crabgrass

here and there. Tuttle was a contractor of sorts and parked his trucks wherever the mood struck him. The house was run-down too.

Sheriff Gruber was out of his car first. Tuttle stood, legs spread apart and hands in his pockets, next to his son who shifted from one foot to the other, his face twitching, not from apprehension but from excitement.

"Where is she?" asked the sheriff. "Know who she is?"

Tuttle nodded his head in the direction of the woods. "Over there," he said, "near the creek. Just a few feet off lovers' lane. We don't know her. Cute kid. About nine."

Car doors were opening and men and women were milling about, their presence causing other cars to slow down, some to stare, others to join the crowd.

"Listen here," called the sheriff, "we have a nasty business to attend to and we don't need the help of any of you. As a matter of fact, if anyone follows us into the woods he will be arrested. Hear that? Matt Anderson," he jerked his head to where Matt stood among the crowd, "I'm deputizing you to keep everybody out of that woods." With that he removed his badge and pinned it to the pocket of Anderson's shirt. "Let's go."

Tuttle led the way, followed by Limbo, the sheriff, and the deputy sheriff. The sheriff was carrying a blanket, the deputy carried the photographic equipment. They walked silently, the twigs crackling under their feet and the pushing back of small bushes making the only sound.

Tuttle's head was bowed and his mind was whirling. His thoughts were catapulting from negative to positive. He was praying silently, asking forgiveness for the doubts he felt about his son.

What was going on in Limbo's mind was anybody's guess. His chubby cheeks were pink from excitement. The light fuzz that grew on his face and upper lip stood out, but his skin was like that of a baby, and he had yet to shave.

Finally they reached the spot and Limbo, flopping his arms, said, "Here it is, Sheriff—right underneath that dogwood tree."

"Stand back, all of you," ordered the sheriff as he put down the blanket. He walked the few feet to where the girl lay. Dropping down on one knee, he put his hand on her wrist. His own hands were cold and moist from perspiration. He thought, *this could be my own daughter, poor innocent little thing. What fiendish mind perpetrated this satanic act?*

"She's dead, all right," he called, "but we can soon find out who she is from these library books. Should have her card inside." He took out his handkerchief and put it over one hand while he lifted the corner of one of the books. No card. He moved a little to the left and lifted the cover of the second. "Debbie Allen," he read aloud. "Anyone know her?"

The Tuttles shook their heads.

The deputy spoke up, "Isn't that the name of the new science teacher? Just moved in, I hear."

"Don't know," answered the sheriff, "but it won't take long to find out. Who in hell would want to kill a kid?"

He motioned for the deputy to step forward with the camera equipment. Silently they took pictures from every angle. Nothing was touched. Then slowly he went back to pick up the blanket. Handing one end to the deputy, they gently covered the child's body.

"Stay here, Art," he told his deputy. "See that no one comes near. I'm going to the car and radio for an ambulance to remove the body. We'll also need something to wrap the bike in. Must be prints on that."

"Tuttle, you and Limbo better come with me. There's sure as hell going to be trouble when the townspeople hear about this." With that, the three left and made their



way down the path that led out of the woods. When they had nearly reached the entrance, the sheriff spoke. "You two walk right to my car and get in. Don't say a word to anyone. If this mob should sus-

pect what has happened, no telling what they might do. I'll lock you both up for your own safety until we can get to the bottom of this."

As they came out of the clearing, Tuttle glanced at the house.

He saw the lace curtain in the front room move. He knew his wife was behind that curtain, sick with fear and worry. The sheriff had his hand on his gun as they moved to the car.

"What's up?" called the men from the crowd. "What's going on in there? We're going in, if you don't tell us. If that Limbo has hurt somebody we want to know about it!"

"Just a minute now," shouted the sheriff, raising his hand. "I'm in charge here and I say no one goes in there unless he wants to spend the night in jail. As to what went on, I can't tell you; not yet, anyway. Now go home, all of you. There's nothing you can do here."

The crowd had grown larger and there were angry rumblings.

Tuttle and Limbo had climbed into the back seat of the car, and the sheriff slipped behind the wheel. Closing windows so no one could hear, he radioed for an ambulance. Then he started to back out of the driveway. All of a sudden, the mob, frenzied by the actions of the sheriff, surged forward to the car, grabbing the doors and shouting, "What's been done? Did Limbo murder someone?"

The sheriff, now angry himself, and anxious to protect his passengers, shifted from reverse into drive. It was the reaction that was

needed. All jumped for safety as the sheriff propelled the car through the crowd and out to the road. It was a speedy and bumpy ride.

Tuttle looked back, anxious for sight of his wife. Closed doors, which he knew were locked, faced him. It was the beginning of days and nights of sleeplessness and heartbreak.

Ted Allen, his wife Marcia and their two daughters, Debbie and Carolyn, had arrived in Williamsport only three weeks before and were looking forward to a quiet life in a small town. He'd had many offers as a science teacher, but choose Williamsport since it was in a region of good hunting and fishing. A quiet, good-natured man of thirty-eight, Ted was tall, fair, and slightly stooped. Marcia was four years his junior, and a dedicated homemaker. She basked in the happiness that was hers. With dark hair and classic features, Marcia was a beauty. Of the two children, Carolyn, the younger, looked most like her mother. She was a pixie, both in mind and spirit. Her aptitude for mimicry could turn the dinner table into a theater, gay with wholesome revelry.

Debbie was the image of her father, tall for her age, with light

skin and hair and deep blue eyes. She was shy, studious and well-mannered, and obeyed orders to the letter.

Sheriff Gruber learned all of this from the school principal, before going to the Allen home. He kept telling himself over and over, "What a nasty job I have to do, and no way out!"

As he drove into the driveway to the Allen home, he could see a man and woman in the backyard. They were playing with a small shaggy dog and laughing together at the antics the dog used to get their attention.

With a sigh, Sheriff Gruber switched off his engine and stepped out of the car. The couple looked at him with some surprise, before holding out their hands and stepping forward to greet him. The sheriff shook each hand warmly and with reluctance, then handed Mr. Allen the library card. "Recognize this?" he asked. The reaction was fast.

"Debbie, it's Debbie's. Has she had an accident?" Marcia cried in alarm. She searched his face for an answer, her hand gripping the arm of her husband.

Sheriff Gruber told them as gently as he could what had happened.

Marcia covered her face with her hands, her whole body shaking. "No, no! I won't listen to you!

You've got to be wrong. It couldn't be Debbie!" Ted held her tightly in his arms, his face pale, as she beat at his chest with her fists.

"Don't, Marcia, don't," he said softly. "There must be some mistake. Take it easy until we are sure." He led her firmly into the house, his own eyes welled with tears. The sheriff followed and stood in the doorway, his cap in his hands.

"I'll be back in an hour," he said. "It will be necessary for someone to make positive identification. Think you could find someone to stay with your wife?"

Ted nodded. "Maybe Madge Evans, the wife of another teacher. I'll call her. They don't live very far away. If she isn't home perhaps her neighbor, Rachel Armstrong, can come."

The sheriff nodded. "I'm sure sorry to be bearer of such news," he said. "Better call a doctor to give your wife a sedative. I'll be back."

As he stepped outside, into the near dusk, he grabbed at his throat and held it tight. The constrictions of held-back emotions were giving him pain. His face showed the strain, anger and disbelief of the afternoon.

As soon as the town heard the news, the phone began ringing in the sheriff's office. Every word was recorded, whether it seemed rele-

vant or not. Reporters streamed in from nearby towns to get personal data on the child's life, and pictures.

The Allens took the phone off the hook to protect themselves from the curious and the sadists. Sheriff Gruber sent a deputy to guard the home, to insure the couple complete privacy. Little Carolyn, who had been away during the afternoon, sat holding her dog, her head buried in his furry coat.

Madge Evans had made all the necessary phone calls, kept a pot of coffee on the burner, and pressed little Carolyn to drink her hot chocolate. The child was bathed in grief. Her father sat near her on the sofa holding her hand, while the mother lay asleep upstairs under sedation.

The ordeal of the identification was over. The medical examiner had made his report. Death was due to strangulation. The child had not been molested. As to whether there were prints on the bicycle, it was not yet known.

Sheriff Gruber was puzzled about a number of things. Mr. Allen had told him that Debbie would not have gone into the woods alone. Since it was generally known that winos often used the woods, the danger had been carefully explained to the girls.

Debbie, especially, kept the rules

set down by the family. She had asked about one o'clock if she could use the bike to go to the library, and asked Carolyn to go along. The sister, however, had made plans to play with another child in the neighborhood. That Debbie had not returned by three o'clock did not concern the Allens in the least. A studious type, she often spent hours reading and making lists of books she would read in the future.

This obedience, Gruber felt, would have refrained her from talking to, or going with Limbo. And yet, Limbo was his one and only prime suspect. The woods had been combed for clues. Nothing of any importance was found. At present, he had Limbo under lock and key. His father had been permitted to return home.

The majority of the incoming calls expressed belief that Limbo was not only suspect, but most certainly the guilty party. The town was seething in anger over the atrocity that had taken place. Not much else was discussed in Williamsport, and worried mothers kept their children indoors. Mass hysteria was taking place and the sheriff was besieged to find the killer.

The following day, a report was issued that no prints were found on the bike, other than Debbie's

and her cute little sister Carolyn's.

Sheriff Gruber found it necessary to take Limbo into Charleston, a larger town, for his own safety. A lie detector test could also be given there. He had little faith in what the test would reveal on a person with limited intelligence.

The day of the funeral, Gruber and his men milled about the crowd. They searched the faces of those who attended, hoping to unearth a new clue. In his own mind, he felt that Limbo was falsely accused. He doubted that he could use the persuasion necessary to lure the girl into the woods. And what was the *motive*? Sex had been ruled out by the medical examiner. Hate did not seem to be any part of Limbo's personality; he was as playful as a puppy. Nor was any of the huge crowd acting in a suspicious manner.

The following week the report on the lie detector test was announced as ineffective and indecisive. Limbo was kept on at Charleston, this time in a detention home because of his age. Meanwhile citizens clamored for an arrest.

Every known wino, every vagrant, every person known to the Allen family was questioned. Nothing significant was uncovered.

Days ran into weeks and yet nothing new had been reported.

Limbo, who had been held under a charge of suspicion only, was released and, for safety, sent to the farm of his grandparents in another state.

Madge Evans sat at her kitchen window sipping a cup of coffee. It was now three months since little Debbie Allen had been buried. Her own children were not allowed to play out of doors after school. The town was more out of patience with the sheriff than ever. The citizens wanted results, not theories.

As Madge put down her cup, she noticed Rachel Armstrong come out of her kitchen door carrying a small basket of wet clothes which she began to hang on the line. It was a simple housewifely task that could be seen from anyone's kitchen window in any neighborhood. She stirred lazily, remembering her own unwashed clothes. Rachel, while being a good enough neighbor, was shy, withdrawn. Madge had gone out of her way to extend friendliness. Since their backyards were side-by-side, she had often invited the Armstrongs to the cookouts she could dream up on a moment's notice.

Rachel was still hanging clothes, neatly and precisely, sheets, followed by pillowcases, followed by her husband's white shirts.

Madge moved away from the

window to refill her coffee cup. As she sat down again, she looked out. Rachel had gone into the house. The precisely-hung clothes had one item out of character with all the rest—a little girl's dress! And the couple had no children!

Later in the day, Madge stopped in to repay a cup of sugar she had borrowed a week before.

"Come in," called Rachel. "I've had quite a day. Washing's done and most of the ironing."

"Guess I'll bring mine over, since you're so industrious."

Rachel laughed. "Industrious is hardly the word. Boredom is what propels me to work. Guess I should be out looking for a job."

"That's what I'm going to do, when I get my children into Junior High. I don't feel a mother should work when the children are young."

"Neither do I. When I was a little girl, I used to come home to an empty house. Sure was lonesome. Promised myself I'd never do that to my children."

"But you didn't have any children, did you, Rachel? That is, you've never mentioned it."

"Children?" she said vaguely. "I did have one—a girl. Her name was Lisa. She died, you know." The pain of remembering showed in her eyes.

"Oh," cried Madge, "I *am* sorry. I wouldn't have mentioned chil-

dren if I had known. So that's why there was a child's dress on the line today! You shouldn't keep it—it's best not to relive the past. Why did you wash it?"

"It's time to drop the hem again. I let it down a little bit every year. That reminds me how tall Lisa would be if she were alive today."

Strange, thought Madge. *This poor lost soul. What size would that dress have been? Five? Seven?* She wished she had looked more closely. She studied Rachel's face. It was serene now, smooth, clear brow and blue eyes, really a pretty woman, but all communication had been cut off.

The next day Madge called on Esther Boyd. "Esther," she said, "you know my neighbor, Rachel Armstrong, don't you?"

"Of course. Why?"

"She's such an unhappy person, the do-gooder in me wants to help her. Let's invite her for bridge and bowling. We could include Marcia Allen, too. They both need to get out."

"Fine. They should have much in common. They both lost daughters in tragic ways. Fortunately for Marcia, she still has another."

"Esther, what did Lisa die from? I didn't know until yesterday they'd even had a child." She told her about the dress on the line and that she had inquired about it.

"A hemorrhage. Tonsillectomy. Too bad. They took it so very hard. Poor Doc Prescott felt almost as badly as they did. Rachel was there, and kept screaming, 'Stop the blood, you've got to stop the blood.' It took two nurses to hold her away from her child. It was awful, I hear."

"Poor thing. No wonder Rachel has so much on her mind. When we had the Armstrongs in to meet Marcia, Ted and the girls, she made quite a fuss over Debbie that day. Must have reminded her of her own little girl."

"They were both blondes, and about the same age. You should have seen Lisa the day they buried her; all in pink ruffles, even a flower in her hair. Looked like she was going to a party."

"You know, this flower business—" Madge enumerated on her hand. "First, there was supposed to have been one in Debbie's hair when she was found. Then Rachel put one in Debbie's hair at my party. Now you say her own child was buried with one. Doesn't this say anything to you?"

"No. What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm going to hate myself for even thinking it, but Debbie liked Rachel. She *would* have gone into the woods with her, maybe just to see the dogwood trees that were in blossom then." Her eyes

opened wide. "Don't you *see*?"

"Yes, but it may be only a train of coincidental events. She certainly doesn't seem like the kind of woman who would deliberately hurt a child."

"But if she is mentally off-key?"

"Well, but is she?"

"Who knows? Anyway, I'm going to tell the sheriff. He has worked so hard on this case. You know how many times they picked up a vagrant and thought they had their man—and then that poor Limbo. Most of the townspeople still think he's the guilty one, only they can't prove anything. Worst of all, he needs his parents and he's practically held out of town at the point of a gun. It's terrible."

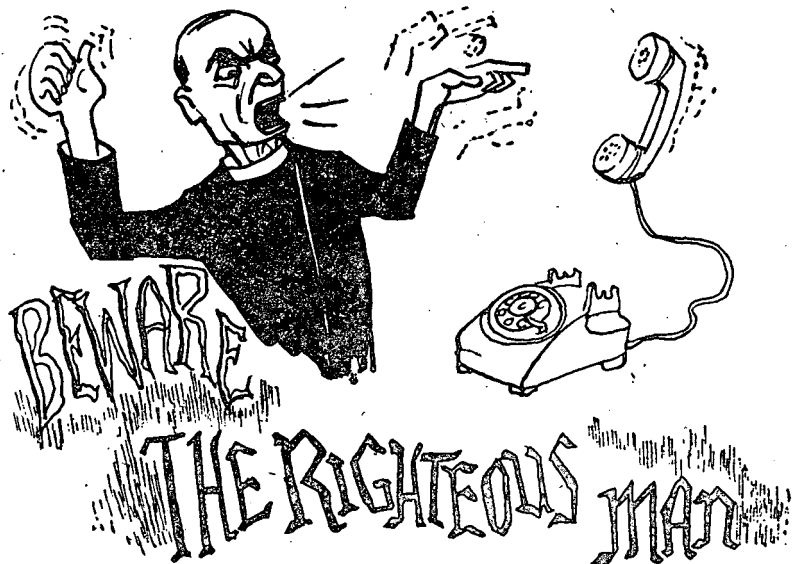
"Well, good luck. I hope you're wrong."

"So do I. I never expected to be in the middle of this thing."

Williamsport did not have long to wait. The news spread like wildfire that Debbie Allen and Rachel Armstrong had gone into Jenkins woods to see the beautiful dogwood trees.

"I took little Lisa, my own daughter," Rachel insisted. "We picked some wild flowers. Then her throat began to bleed again. I put my hand on her throat to stop it. I *saved* her *life*," she said innocently.

As our title suggests, it might subserve one to be chary of the individual who would appear seraphic in moral character.



PATROLMAN Rath glanced at the mailboxes in the apartment building foyer. He tramped in and up a flight of stairs to the second floor, and found apartment 16. Beside the door was a bell-push and a small white card, engraved: *Miss J. Campbell*.

Rath punched the bell and waited. He took off his uniform cap and placed it beneath his arm, straightened the knot of his dark blue tie.

Now the door opened a scant inch and a worried eye peered out at him.

"Miss Campbell? I'm Patrolman Rath. I have orders to check with

By **DICK
ELLIS**

BEWARE THE RIGHTEOUS MAN

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you about some complaint you—”

“Oh, yes,” the woman behind the eye said. “Just a second while I take the chain off.”

There was a metallic rattle, then the door swung wide.

“I’m Jeanne Campbell,” the woman said. “Come in. I’ve seen you. Aren’t you the officer who walks the beat along the avenue? Yes, of course.”

Rath tramped inside. He cast a glance around a small, rather messy livingroom, and turned to the woman. “As I understand it,” he said, “you’ve been receiving some annoying phone calls.”

“Annoying! That’s putting it mildly.”

Jeanne Campbell gestured the patrolman to a chair, then went to turn off a radio playing softly across the room. She was a small, fluffy-haired woman, little more than a girl, really, though the curves beneath her tight-fitting housecoat were mature enough.

Rath waited until she was seated on a sofa, then he sat down on the extreme edge of a chair facing her. He took out notebook and pencil.

“They started about three weeks ago,” Jeanne Campbell said. “The phone calls, I mean. I’d been living here only a few days. In fact, I still don’t understand how this—this character got my phone number. It isn’t listed yet, of course.”

Rath rubbed his blunt chin with the eraser of his pencil. “Well, there are several ways. Perhaps this man followed you home, got your name off the mailbox, and the address. Then called information, and asked for your number.”

“Oh, I see.” She shuddered, reached for a cigarette, and lit it with trembling fingers. “It’s kind of —scary, to think this man might be following me around here.”

“I wouldn’t let that bother me, Miss. This type of person is usually harmless.”

“You haven’t listened to him—his voice on the phone, and the things he says.”

“Yes?”

“The first time, he started off by saying he was a preacher. Then he started asking me questions. He wasn’t any preacher, believe me.”

Rath was watching her alertly now. “Go on, please.”

“Well, to put it as politely as possible, he—he was very interested in my sex life. And mixed in with these very intimate questions, he gave me a lecture—that’s the only word for it—on the wages of sin. Real wild. I told him where he could go, and hung up on him.”

Patrolman Rath made a note, looked up at her.

She went on, “Couple nights later he called again. Same pious, kind of shrill voice. Took up right where

he'd left off, only more so. Awful!"

"The preacher," Rath said softly.

"Huh?"

"I'll explain in a minute. Please go on."

"Well, it's been like that ever since. He calls two or three times a week, ranting and raving. The last time was about eight o'clock this evening, less than an hour ago. I hung up and called the police. I mean, enough's enough." She stabbed out her cigarette in an ash-tray.

Rath studied her flushed face. He said, "Miss Campbell, for about the last six or seven months, there have been a lot of phone calls like these to young, single women, living alone, like yourself, all in this general neighborhood. It's pretty certain all were made by the same man. We, the department, even have a name for him. 'The preacher.'"

The girl stared. "You mean—but why haven't you caught him? A creep like that shouldn't be allowed to run loose."

"It's very difficult to catch a person like this," Rath said. "We've tried, you can be sure of that. A couple of women who have been bothered by this man agreed to work with us. They arranged meetings with him, but he didn't show up. He's careful never to say anything that would give a hint as to who he is, or what he does for a living."

"But that's awful," the girl said angrily.

Rath nodded. He got to his feet. "I'll turn in my report," he said. "Men from the precinct detective squad will contact you tomorrow."

"Detectives!" she exclaimed. Her lips tightened. "What will they do, hold my hand? They should be out trying to catch this creep, before he hurts somebody."

Rath, who had been tramping toward the door, stopped suddenly. He turned to the girl. "Why do you say that?"

"Good gosh, isn't it obvious? A nut like that, he might do anything."

For the first time an expression of uncertainty crossed the policeman's big, jewly face. Finally he said, "I didn't want to alarm you, but maybe I should. About a month ago, a young woman was murdered in this neighborhood; Miss Campbell. We found out from a friend of hers that she had been getting these phone calls. She hadn't reported them to the police. There's a good chance that's got nothing to do with her murder, of course, but—"

"My gosh," Jeanne Campbell breathed. She got up shakily, crossed to the windows overlooking the street, and stared out at the dark night, then abruptly pulled down the shades. She asked, "How did she die?"

Rath shuffled his big feet uneasily. "She was beaten to death, Miss Campbell."

She turned, her face pale.

"As I said, there's better than an even chance that the calls had nothing to do with her murder," Rath told her.

"But—there might be."

The patrolman didn't answer. He went to the door and opened it. Jeanne Campbell followed, nervously clenching and unclenching her fingers.

"Will you be home tomorrow?" Rath asked.

"What? Oh, yes, tomorrow's Saturday. I don't have to work. I'm a secretary, you know, at an office downtown."

"Yes. Well, the detectives will probably get here in the morning sometime. Until then, try not to worry. Keep your doors and windows locked, and—"

"There's just this door, and no way for anyone to reach the windows," the girl said vaguely. "Thank goodness for that."

"Good." Rath put on his cap, nodded, and headed for the staircase.

The girl watched him. She called, "At least I'll feel better, knowing you're out there on the avenue, walking your beat, in case I want to yell for help."

Rath nodded again. He turned

down the stairs. Behind him he heard the girl close her door. He paused until he heard the clink of the doorchain being put in place, then went on down and out of the building.

On the street he looked right and left. He started for the nearest call-box, a block away. He walked with his usual slow, regular pace. It was just nine o'clock. Many of the stores and shops along the street were still open. Automatically he checked each place as he passed.

Reaching the call-box, he keyed it open and got the precinct house on the line. A voice growled, "Sergeant Graham."

"This is Rath. I checked out this Campbell woman. About the same story as with the other complaints we've had."

The sergeant swore. "This 'preacher' character again?"

"Sounds like it."

"That makes—what? About half a dozen different dames the 'preacher' is calling." Graham paused, then muttered, "I just hope we don't end up with two or three more dead women on our hands before we nail the bum."

"Yes. Anything new on the girl who was killed last week?"

"Not a whisper," Graham said.

"Well, I'll check in at ten."

"Right. Keep your eyes open down there, Rath."

Rath put the phone back in the box, locked it, and moved on along his beat. He stopped for coffee at a corner diner at nine-thirty. Shortly after ten he flushed a young boy and girl out of a darkened entranceway of an apartment building near the far end of the beat. He gave them a stern lecture and sent them on their way.

Slowly, methodically, he moved around the sixteen blocks that made up his beat. Each time he passed the building where Jeanne Campbell lived, he glanced up at her closely-shaded windows. Once he saw her shadow moving across the shades.

Finally midnight came, and with it his relief. He talked a few minutes with the man who had the midnight to eight shift. He told him angrily about the young couple he'd found necking in the apartment building entrance.

The other man laughed. "You're just jealous. What you need is to get married again. Just because it didn't work the first time; that doesn't mean—hey, what's with you?"

Rath had turned and was walking rapidly away.

The man called after him, "Heck, I didn't mean anything."

Rath didn't pause or look back. He was still fuming inwardly when he reached the precinct house and changed from his uniform into street clothes, and checked out for

the night. He got his car from the parking lot and drove through the now nearly deserted streets.

It had been a year since he had divorced his wife, but still people brought it up, laughing about it, rubbing it in, the way he'd been taken by a cheap little hustler; and the way she'd left him flat once she'd drained his bank account.

He wished he could find her again, now. He'd give her what she deserved. But she had vanished months ago, and he hadn't been able to trace her.

There were plenty just like her around. He saw them every night as he walked his beat; cheap, wearing too much makeup, with demure smiles and knowing eyes.

Five minutes later he rang the bell at the Campbell woman's apartment. He'd left his car on a side street and walked from there. No one had seen him. No one would.

Except Jeanne Campbell.

He heard her frightened voice inside the door. "Who—?"

"Patrolman Rath. I was here earlier."

Slowly, she opened the door. "Has something happened?"

He pushed inside, shut the door and put his broad back against it. He said, "You're dirt. You don't deserve to live." His voice was very different from his usual voice. So

was his face. The girl retreated into the room.

"You!" she gasped. "But you're a policeman."

He nodded. He moved toward her. "That's right. Part of my job is getting rid of scum like you. I thought maybe I could scare you—all the tramps like you—out of my district, with the phone calls. That didn't work. So. . ."

He moved nearer, doubling his fists.

"You killed that girl last week!" she screamed.

His eyes glistened in the lamp light. He was breathing heavily. "She deserved what she got. So do you."

He lunged, but as he swung his fist, the girl ducked to one side. Then she came up, grasping his arm and giving it a twist and a flip. Rath's own momentum sent him crashing headfirst into the wall across the room.

When he came to, he was lying face down on the rug, his arms handcuffed behind him. He heard a familiar voice.

". . . Yeah, we've had an eye on

Rath for some time," Sergeant Graham was saying. "He was always a little too self-righteous for comfort, and since his wife left him, he's been getting more and more like a fanatic. You know?"

"I know," Jeanne Campbell said dryly. "My mother used to tell me not to worry about the bums in the world, but beware the righteous man. He's the one likely to blow up in your face."

Rath groaned. He twisted his head around, looked toward the sergeant and the girl. They were standing over by the phone.

Graham snapped, "Stay put, Rath. The wagon will be here for you in a couple minutes."

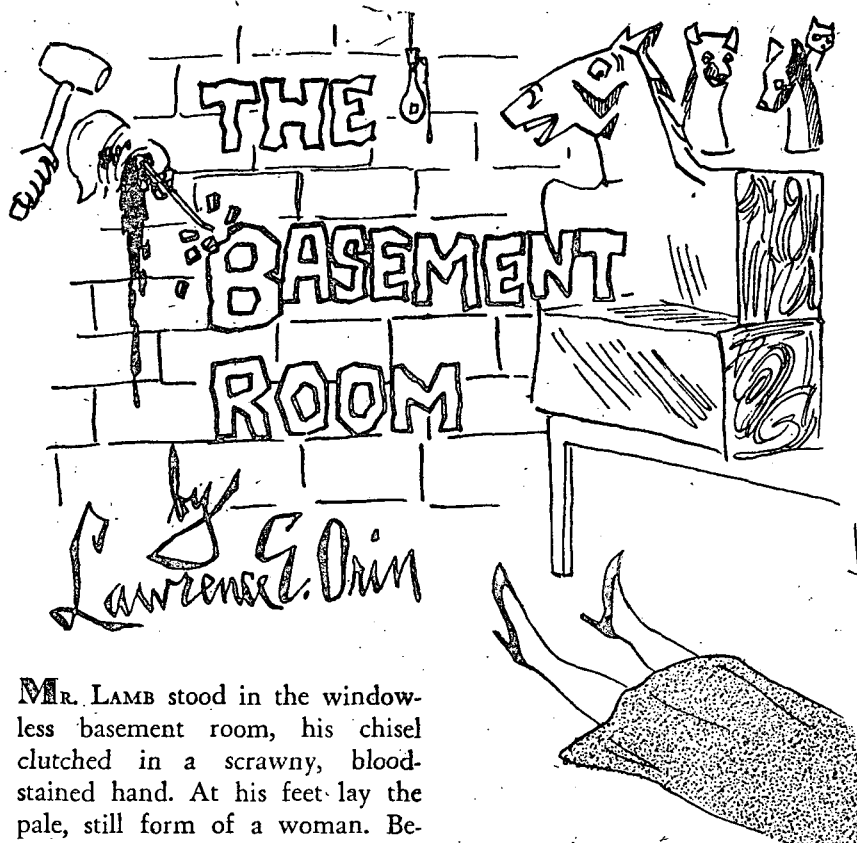
"What—how—"

"Oh, by the way," Graham said, "let me introduce you to Sergeant Jeanne Campbell. Headquarters sent her to our precinct to see if she could smoke out 'the preacher.' Did a good job, didn't she?"

Rath didn't answer. He pressed his face back down into the dusty carpet. Tears came to his eyes; he felt betrayed. You just couldn't trust anyone these days.



Before one is provoked to jostle another's concentration, it would be prudent to weigh the attendant consequences.



MR. LAMB stood in the windowless basement room, his chisel clutched in a scrawny, blood-stained hand. At his feet lay the pale, still form of a woman. Behind him, on the workbench, a horse's head, nostrils flaring, was half-emerged from a huge block of wood. It stared stoically at the tableau from its lone, blind, unblinking eye.

Above, garroted at the end of its slender cord, a harsh, naked ceiling light swung gently to and fro. Carvings of animals, real and fancied, embryonic and complete,

crowded the small workshop. Their black, swollen shadows nodded in unison on the bare, white-washed walls, as if in unanimous approval of the scene they'd just witnessed. So it seemed to Mr. Lamb.

Mr. Lamb had tolerated many indignities at the hand of his wife, but this time she'd miscalculated the result. It had been a great error in judgment on her part to strike him while he held this sharp instrument.

She'd come to the top of the stairs and called, but he'd been so engrossed in his work he hadn't heard. In fact, he hadn't realized her presence until, infuriated to distraction, she'd descended on him, shouting in his ear, hitting him on the back of his shoulder. Actually, it had been a push rather than a blow, but she shouldn't have done it—not while he was manipulating this keen-edged chisel.

He contemplated the bulky figure crumpled on the concrete floor. Thirty pounds heavier than she'd been twenty years ago, Elizabeth bore slight resemblance to the tall, willowy girl he'd married. Her face retained only a trace of her former beauty. Round and fleshy now, it was drained of natural color, the heavy rouge and lipstick crudely accented in the ungracious, brilliant light.

For a moment, almost reluctantly, he allowed himself a sensation of pity for the woman—not affection. Love had vanished long ago, and at times he wondered if it had ever existed. No, it was closer to a feeling of sympathy. He was certain his disappointment in her could be matched only by hers in him. Perhaps this was the single bond that had kept them together all these dreary years.

The first few months hadn't been so bad. Occasionally, often just in the nick of time, he'd sold a piece of his sculpture for enough to pay the back rent on their little studio-apartment in Sausalito. Sometimes there was enough to celebrate with chicken and wine at Galento's.

Those had been the good days; then Elizabeth had come into a modest inheritance. It had included this old house, pretentious and ugly. To Mr. Lamb's dismay, his wife had proven to be a shrewd investor, and soon they were no longer dependent on his uncertain earnings for their livelihood.

With their new financial security came Elizabeth's constant nagging for him to forsake what appeared to her to be his endless, unprofitable chiseling on chunks of wood. Stubbornly, he'd refused. Too proud to accept his wife's

charity and too obstinate to acknowledge his mediocrity as a sculptor, he'd banished himself to this cellar workshop. He left it only for a few hours of fitful sleep in his single bed, or to snatch a bite of food from the refrigerator in the big, old-fashioned kitchen upstairs.

Each blow of Mr. Lamb's mallet, each hew of his gouge, was in rebellion against an unappreciative, unsympathetic society which was too blind to see the genius in his masterpieces.

Now Mr. Lamb pulled a rag from his hip pocket and wiped the chisel clean, then laid it on the tool-littered bench. Sticky, warm blood still stained his hand and wrist. Elizabeth was much too heavy for him to carry up the steep, cellar steps. He'd have to fetch some water and a pan from the kitchen. Glancing around the shop, he decided there was nothing else he'd need from upstairs. His slippered feet whispered over the chip-strewn, concrete floor and padded softly up the wooden treads.

When he reached the head of the stairs he heard the persistent ringing of a telephone. Suddenly he realized he was the only person who could answer it now. The jingling sounds led him to the front of the house, and he found

the instrument on Elizabeth's desk. Keeping his right hand wrapped in the soiled rag, he picked up the receiver.

"Hello," he said.

The voice at the other end of the line registered surprise. "Hello! Is Mrs. Lamb there?"

"She's not here right now," Mr. Lamb answered politely.

"Oh, I see. Well, I'll have to call later in the day."

"Very well," Mr. Lamb said.

"Good-bye," said the puzzled voice.

"Good-bye," he replied, then gently replaced the receiver in its cradle.

He took a long look around the sunny room. It really was very pleasant. He was almost sure the drapes and rugs were new. It had been so long since he'd last been in this part of the house he couldn't be certain.

Back down the long, thickly-carpeted hall he came to the big bathroom. He fumbled for the switch and the room flooded with light, revealing burnished fixtures, resplendent mirrors, and a glass-partitioned area containing an over-sized, half-sunken bath. He'd forgotten how lavish the room was.

For a long time now, he'd been using the little half-bath off the rear hallway, with its metal-lined stall and cold, plastic shower cur-

tain. He was glad he'd rediscovered this huge, deep tub. He decided to use it soon.

Carefully he washed his hands until not a trace of crimson remained. He started to toss the bloody rag into a wastebasket, then thought better of the idea and, wrapping it in toilet paper, pushed it into his hip pocket. Snowy white, sharply creased guest towels hung from a nickel-plated rack. He reached for one to dry his hands, then hesitated at the sacrilege. But why not? No one was going to forbid him. Boldly he snatched one from the rod, dried his hands, then, thinking he might find use for it later, he left the towel draped around his right hand.

He supposed he must be getting back downstairs soon. Already he'd stayed up here longer than he'd intended. It wouldn't do to leave Elizabeth there, although the thought intrigued him.

From afar, Mr. Lamb heard the throaty blast of a ship's whistle tooting farewell as it passed beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. It had been years since he had watched the tramp steamers wend their way westward out of San Francisco Bay. He stood silent a moment, listening to the half-forgotten sound, an old man dreaming a young man's dream of soft

breezes and tall swaying palms.

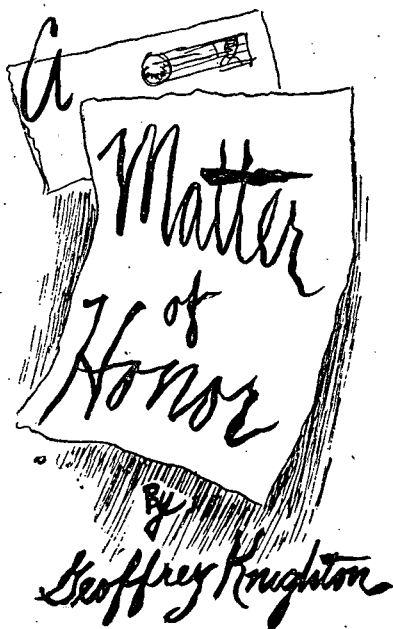
This was not for him, not now. He knew what he must do, and resolutely he trudged to the kitchen. There, searching through the cupboards, he located a large, deep pan and two dish towels. He half-filled the pan with water from the sink. Balancing it carefully, he made his way to the stair landing and down to the familiar basement room.

The light had stopped its pendulation now, and the shadows on the wall were still, as if breathlessly waiting for the next act of the little drama to unfold. Nothing else had changed during his jaunt into the world upstairs. Elizabeth lay silent, motionless and ghastly white.

Mr. Lamb placed the pan on the floor beside her. He dropped stiffly to his knees. Like pistol shots in the hush of the room, his joints cracked as he assumed the unaccustomed position. He unrolled the towel from his hand and examined it carefully. He wanted to be certain the bleeding from the gash in his palm had stopped.

Slowly, he began to bathe his wife's face with the cool water. Suddenly, her fluttering eyelids told him she was alive. Strange! Why would a woman as self-sufficient as his wife faint at the mere sight of blood?

*An accusation of mischievous conduct against one might well
provoke reflection upon the universal deviousness of man.*



STRICTLY speaking, it wouldn't be correct to say that Captain of Detectives Daniel Abbott was out of his depth. He was much too competent an officer, but here in the proud Webb home on Styles Ridge, at five o'clock of a cool spring morning, crime had a different smell. Abbott was no stranger to murder, but in the city, crime usu-

ally followed a set, predictable pattern.

Sound investigative procedure, backed by encyclopedic knowledge of the city, gave the police just the edge they needed to keep the peace. Few cases in Rivermead were solved by great Holmesian leaps of imagination. The pattern was so well known that when something happened to alter it, it didn't take long to find the broken thread.

Dan Abbott was a first-class policeman by any standards. Among the lavish homes of Styles Ridge, however, the pattern was not the same as it was in the city. There had been incidents, of course, in this wealthy and influential district, but they were generally fairly obvious, and usually gave the police less trouble than the more sordid, often better planned crimes in the seamier districts.

From a practical point of view, when the wife of one of the city's most prominent young businessmen is found shot dead in her fashionable livingroom and there are indications that she may have done it herself, a cop walks a little



more carefully than he does when Rosie the stripper gets herself knocked off in a sleazy little trap on Center Street. Pressure may seldom be obvious or deliberate, but it's there.

Abbott stood now in the living-room of the Webb home, watching the photographers and the lab men at work. This wasn't going to be a clean one. It might turn out to be straightforward, but it wasn't going to be nice. The papers would soon be off and running. Sighing inwardly, he turned to the man beside him.

Jonathan Styles Webb, grandson of one of the first settlers in this California city, was wealthy and self-assured. Conscious of his position, maintaining the front, he kept his shock and grief well under control in the presence of the unwelcome but necessary intruders. Even so, his normally smooth, well-tanned face was haggard and pale, accented by the stubble of a dark, early-morning beard.

"Mr. Webb," Abbott began, "I'm sure you realize that the sooner we get a complete statement from you, the better it will be for us. We have to get something for the record. I realize this is pretty harrowing for you, but if you could just go over the whole thing once more I'll have a man take it down and you can sign a transcript later. I hate to

trouble you right now, but we need all the information we can get."

Webb waved away the apologies almost impatiently. "Of course, Captain. I understand. Let's go along to the study." He led the way across the hall. Abbott beckoned to a plainclothesman and they walked into a room with soft green walls, green carpet, leather chairs and walnut bookshelves. The plainclothesman settled himself on a chair in the corner, his notebook open on his knee.

"Now, Mr. Webb," said Abbott, "please tell us again how you discovered your wife's body."

Webb passed a hand wearily over his face and sat down in a deep chair beside the walnut desk.

"We had been out to dinner with some friends," he began, "the Carters on Briar Drive. We got home about two a.m., I guess. Margaret decided she'd play through a new record before she went to bed. I'd had a bit of an upset stomach all day and wasn't feeling too well, so I decided to get a breath of air before turning in. Usually, I take a short walk around our grounds, but I felt a bit restless and got out my wife's car and went for a drive. I must have driven around for a couple of hours. It was about four-thirty when I came back and let myself

in through the garage door. On my way to the stairs, I noticed that the lights were still on in the livingroom, and went to turn them out." Webb paused. The muscles in his jaw tightened. "I found Margaret lying face down on the floor. She was sprawled out, her right arm stretched across the carpet. The gun was lying on the floor, about six inches from her hand." He stopped and swallowed convulsively. He leaned forward, lacing his hands between his knees. "I'm afraid I didn't think about police procedure, Captain," he continued. "I turned her onto her side. I knew something terrible had happened but it simply didn't occur to me that she might be dead. Then I saw the blood on the front of her dress. I knew then, of course." He broke off, closed his eyes tightly and clenched his fists. After a moment, he opened his eyes and looked at Abbott.

"So," he said, squaring his shoulders, "she's not in exactly the same position in which I found her, but I didn't touch anything else in the room. I phoned the police from the kitchen, and waited for you on the front steps. That's about it, I guess." He looked up at Abbott who was sitting slouched on the corner of the desk. The captain nodded.

"Right. Well, there are a couple

of questions, Mr. Webb, and then we'll leave you alone. First, did anyone see you—to recognize, I mean—while you were driving around? Did you stop anywhere? For gas, or coffee, maybe?"

"Things are pretty quiet around here at that time of night, or morning, Captain, as I'm sure you know. I'm sure I passed other cars; I seem to remember seeing a prowler car somewhere. I didn't stop any place. I can't even give you a detailed account of the route I covered. I just drove around."

"Did you lock the house after you when you left, do you remember?"

"I'm pretty sure the front door was locked. I went out through the garage, and I know I didn't lock that door. I doubt if there were any other doors open. Unless Margaret—" he stopped.

"Any reason for Mrs. Webb to open a door to someone at that time of night?" asked Abbott.

Again Webb rubbed his hand over his eyes. His agitation increased. He rose to his feet and began to pace up and down the small room.

"Look, Captain, I find this most unpleasant to talk about, but I suppose you'll find out anyway. Margaret was planning to leave me. I've known this for some time. We had sort of a showdown about it

last night. It was the main reason for my taking a drive at such an ungodly hour." Webb stopped pacing and sat down again in his chair. "The crisis last night wasn't the first one," he continued, "but it came at a particularly bad time, and I'm afraid we both said things we didn't mean. I finished by telling her that I would not, under any circumstances, agree to a divorce."

Abbott regarded him steadily for a moment. "Do you think," he asked, "that your wife was upset enough to take her own life? Did she say anything to you that might give you that impression?"

"Certainly she was upset, Captain, but enough that she could have done this, well, I just don't know. I find it hard to believe." Webb grimaced. "We'd had one hell of an evening, I'll tell you that!"

"Why this evening, in particular, Mr. Webb?"

"How would you feel, Captain," Webb's mouth twisted in a wry smile, "if one of your fellow guests at a dinner party were the man your wife planned to marry as soon as she could conveniently be rid of you?"

Abbott looked up sharply. "You realize, of course," he said, "that I'm going to have to have the man's name."

"Oh, I don't mind telling you.

His name is Greyne, Peter Greyne. He's an Englishman, a writer of some kind with the British Government's Technical Advisory Council. He spends quite a lot of time visiting the aerospace outfits here in California. He and Margaret met a couple of years ago."

"Was last night the first time you'd heard of this mutual attraction?" asked Abbott.

"No. He came to see me about three months ago, all very proper and gentlemanly. Explained that he and Margaret had fallen in love, and would I be a good chap and move quietly out of the way."

"You refused?"

"Naturally!" Webb's tone was scornful.

"Why 'naturally', Mr. Webb? Forgive me, but you don't strike me as being the type of man who would want to, well—hang on to a wife who claimed she no longer loved him."

Again the wry smile twisted Webb's lips. "I have my share of pride, if that's what you mean, Captain. I also have a sense of responsibility. My wife and I have a real position in this community, as I'm sure you're aware. Margaret has—had—a good life here. Plenty of money, many good friends and, until Greyne appeared, a sense of her position. A position which she gave every evidence of enjoying, I

might add. I can't believe this infatuation of hers would have lasted. I was, and still am, quite certain that she would have come to her senses in time. It was my intention to see that she had that time."

Abbott nodded. He stood up. "I'm sure you realize, Mr. Webb, that you're in an uncomfortable position. It becomes increasingly important that we find someone who can support your account of your movements after you left the dinner party."

Webb flushed angrily. "Meaning, I suppose, that I could have shot my wife, and then gone for a drive to set up an alibi just weak enough to be convincing. How in the name of heaven can you expect to turn up someone who can prove that Margaret was alive when I left the house? There's never anybody around at that time of the night."

"Well," said Abbott, "we might begin by seeing what Mr. Greyne has to say about his activities last night. Have you any idea where he's staying?"

"He usually stays at the Traveler's Arms, that big motel out on the east side, but I'm not sure if he's there now."

Abbott looked up as one of his men appeared at the door.

"See you for a minute, Captain?"

"Be right with you," said Abbott. He turned back to Webb. "I'm going to ask you to stay right here in this room, Mr. Webb, until we've finished with the rest of the house. Sometime later, we'll get you to sign a copy of the statement you've just made." He turned and walked out into the hall where the detective was waiting.

"What is it, Al?"

"We were giving the woman's room a once-over. Found this in a book in the bedroom." Al held out an opened envelope. Abbott took it and examined it. A good quality envelope, it had Mrs. Webb's name and address on it, and bore an English stamp, canceled in London. The letter was still inside. Abbott drew it out and, holding it carefully by the edges, unfolded it.

"Dearest:" he read. "This is just a brief note to tell you that I shall be leaving in a week's time. A few days in New York, and then on to California—and you!"

"I shall be taking some extra time out there, because I feel we must settle this question once and for all. We must make every effort to persuade Jonathan to release you. We simply cannot go on much longer as we are."

"At the risk of appearing melodramatic, my darling, I am rapidly approaching the point where I feel that if I can't have you, no one

shall." Abbott inhaled, went on:

"If these protestations seem less than honorable, my sweet, blame it on your own dear self. I am so very much in love with you that I can scarcely restrain myself when I think that, even now, you may be in his arms!

"One way or another, I am determined that we shall have done with this whole sorry mess.

"Whatever happens, my love, remember that you are infinitely precious to me.

"Ever,

Peter."

Thoughtfully, Abbott folded the letter and replaced it in the envelope. "I think," he said, "it's high time we had a talk with our overseas visitor. Al, you stick around here. I don't want Webb to leave that room until the lab boys are through, and I don't want him left alone. Send a couple of the boys around the neighborhood to see if anybody heard a shot last night. I don't think they'll get anything, but it's worth a try."

Abbott went out the front door and walked over to a waiting police car. He pulled Greyne's letter out of his pocket and handed it to the driver.

"Evans, I want you to take this down to the lab. Tell them I want everything I can get from it, and I need it fast. I'll check with them

sometime a bit later in the day."

He watched Evans drive away, and then climbed into his own car. Half an hour later, he pulled up in front of the Traveler's Inn. He walked into the lobby and showed his identification to the desk clerk.

"Greyne, Peter Greyne," said Abbott, after the clerk had examined his card. "Got anybody by that name?"

"Bungalow B-8," said the clerk, a worried look on his face. "I hope there's no trouble, Captain. Mr. Greyne's an old customer, a fine gentleman."

"Just a couple of questions," said Abbott. "How do I find B-8?" He listened to the clerk's directions, and started toward the door. He hesitated, then came back to the desk. "If Greyne left his bungalow for a while about two a.m., what are the chances of somebody seeing him?"

"Not much, I'd say." The clerk shrugged. "He has a rented car and he parks right beside the bungalow, which is adjacent to the side entrance. He can come and go whenever he wants."

"One more thing," said Abbott. "You say this Greyne's an old customer. How does he reserve his bungalow? By letter?" The man behind the desk thought for a moment.

"Well, I've never seen a letter.

Far as I know, he sends a cable. I'll check when the manager gets here, if you like." Abbott nodded and turned away from the desk.

A short walk through the spacious grounds brought him to Greyne's bungalow. He stepped up on the porch and pressed the doorbell.

The door was opened by a tall man in pajamas and dressing gown. His rather long, fair hair was tousled and his pale blue eyes had the slightly puffed appearance of recent sleep.

"Mr. Greyne?" asked Abbott, once more proffering his identification.

"That's right." The voice was clipped, the accent precise.

"My name's Abbott, Mr. Greyne. City Police. Will you let me in for a minute, please?"

Greyne blinked his eyes hard and shook his head a couple of times. He held out his hand. "May I see that card of yours again?" He looked closely at the identification, then with a slight smile handed it back. He stood aside. "Come in, Captain. Sorry to be so stunned. Sit down and tell me what I can do for you."

Hat on his knee, Abbott sat on the edge of one of the chairs. He looked slowly around the room, then across at Greyne, who was sitting composedly in another

chair. Real ease or assumed?

"I'm bound to say, Mr. Greyne, that you don't seem unduly concerned about an early morning visit from the police."

The Englishman looked up sharply. "Look, old boy, I don't imagine I'm receiving a call from a detective captain simply because I'm parked in the wrong spot. I expect you'll get round to telling what it's all about in your own good time. Suppose we get on with it."

"You're in this country on a writing assignment for the British Government, are you not?"

Greyne looked mildly surprised. "As a matter of fact, I am. Don't tell me there's something wrong with my visa. Or have I been shown things I shouldn't see?"

"Can you give me an account of your movements last night and early this morning, Mr. Greyne?"

Greyne got to his feet, walked over to a coffee table and picked up a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. "Well, that's fairly easy," he said. "I went to a small dinner party at a friend's home about eight-thirty. I stayed until about two a.m., I should think, then drove home, had a drink, and went to bed. I was there when you arrived."

"Is there anyone who might be

able to substantiate that?" asked Abbott.

The Englishman looked puzzled. "There were other guests at the dinner. But I drove home and went to bed alone."

"Were Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Webb at this dinner party?"

Greyne looked up sharply. "Yes, they were. Look here, Captain, what's all this about?"

"I understand you know the Webbs quite well," Abbott said. "Especially Mrs. Webb. Is that correct?"

Greyne's lips tightened. "I don't think I shall say any more, Captain Abbott." His voice was cold. "At least until you tell me why I am being questioned."

"Mrs. Webb was found dead in her home this morning, Mr. Greyne."

Greyne sat bolt upright in his chair. His face was pale, his eyes staring. "I don't believe it!" He stood up. "How did it happen, Captain? Who did it?"

"Why assume someone did it?" Abbott's voice was mild. "It could have been—"

Greyne interrupted savagely. "For heaven's sake, Abbott, stop playing games! Credit me with some intelligencel You wouldn't be here with your 'cop-and-robber' routine if Margaret had died naturally."

Abbott looked at the other man for a long moment. "Mrs. Webb was found by her husband early this morning, lying stretched out on the livingroom floor. She had been shot through the heart. The gun was found beside her."

Greyne, slumped in his chair, said nothing, but shook his head slowly from side to side.

Abbott went on, "You can see that I must try to trace the movements last night of anyone who could have had access to the Webb home, who knew of the Webb's movements, and who might have had a motive."

Greyne leaned forward. He sighed. "I was in love with Margaret, Captain. I expect her husband has already told you we were trying to get him to agree to a divorce. If he had been shot, I might easily be your best suspect. Incidentally, what about Webb? I'd like to know where he was all the time."

"That's something you'll have to leave to us, I'm afraid, Mr. Greyne," said Abbott. "Of course, there's always the chance, you know, that it was a genuine suicide. Has that occurred to you?"

"That's plain bloody ridiculous!" said Greyne angrily. "No matter what you find, I'm sure Margaret didn't kill herself."

Abbott moved toward the door.

"By the way," he asked casually, "did you ever write to Mrs. Webb?"

Greyne looked puzzled. "Well, yes, certainly. Two or three times perhaps, when I wanted to let her know I was coming over to the States."

"Did you write the letters by hand?"

"I use a typewriter as a tool, Captain. My handwriting is virtually illegible. No, I type all my personal letters, too. I'm not sure that I understand."

"Not important, Mr. Greyne; just a thought." He paused at the door. "You'll be in town for a while?"

There was nothing mirthful in the Englishman's tight grin. "I imagine, Captain, that I shall be here until this business is cleared up."

Back in his car, Abbott sat in thought for a few moments. Something, somewhere, produced a jarring note. Still deep in thought, he drove back across the city to his office.

The report on the envelope and letter was waiting for him. The pressure on the keys was constant so there was no way of knowing if the same person had typed both letter and envelope. The same color ribbon had been used for both. Envelope and paper were not match-

ing stock. There was no indication that the envelope had been steamed open or interfered with in any way beyond the normal effects of opening it.

There was no report from Ballistics.

Abbott looked through the reports of the men who had checked the Webb house, then found his attention wandering. The routine work didn't have much that meant anything. Suppose the woman did shoot herself. But why in the chest? And how is it that the only prints on the gun are hers? Surely Webb or one of the servants had cleaned the weapon at some time. Why no note? And that letter from Greyne—would a woman leave a letter like that lying around where the most casual search would turn it up? Greyne himself, a pretty cool customer; he wouldn't take kindly to being crossed. Had Mrs. Webb really accepted the fact that her husband wouldn't give her a divorce? Was she too much of an aristocrat, or did she think she was, just to walk out and go with Greyne? Finally, Abbott pondered what it was that kept banging on the back of his brain.

He got up from his desk and walked down the hall toward the Ballistic Laboratory. Passing the staff bulletin board, he paused to look at the latest notices. There

was nothing new since the night before. As he turned away, his eye was caught by a colorful poster:

TONITE! COP'S BOWELING!

18th VS 26th PCT

BE THERE!

'Boweling'! What was there against a cop being able to spell? Suddenly he froze, then turned back to the bulletin board.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said aloud. "Abbott, meet Mr. Sherlock Holmes!"

He half ran back to his office, cleared his desk, and leaned back in his chair. He closed his eyes and gave himself up to thought. After about fifteen minutes, he reached for the phone and asked the operator to get him Peter Greyne at the Traveler's Inn.

"Mr. Greyne? Abbott. Look, I wonder if you'd mind meeting me at the Webb place about four-thirty this afternoon. Yes, I realize it won't be pleasant, but you're not



exactly being invited to a party, you know. There are a few more things I have to find out, and it'll be a lot easier if I can do it on the spot. I'll see you about four-thirty. Oh, by the way, have you ever had anything published in this country? Nothing? You're sure. Well, thank you, Mr. Greyne. I'll see you later." He sat for a moment longer, digesting the results of the phone call, then nodded in satisfaction. He called the desk and told the duty officer he'd be out of contact for the next few hours, and left his office.

At four-thirty, tired and dirty, he was in the livingroom of the Webb house. The doorbell rang and Greyne, looking wary, was admitted by the policeman at the door. Abbott crossed the hall and entered the den. He came back almost immediately with an angry-looking Jonathan Webb. Greyne looked as though he didn't know whether to sit down, turn his back on Webb, or just run out of the house.

"Before any of us begins any old-fashioned spouting about being under the same roof with each other," began Abbott, "let me say right away that I'm asking you to help me get this matter cleared up as quickly as possible. If you could both manage to subordinate your personal animosities to your de-

sires to see this business settled, I'd be grateful."

Motioning the two men to sit down, Abbott took up a position beside the fireplace. "Now," he said, "I have a couple of questions I would like to ask you, then I'm going to invite you to participate in a highly irregular discussion in which I shall lay my cards, the few I have, on the table. This is, of course, terrible police technique, but in this case it might just help us get to the truth." He stopped and looked briefly at the others. Both expressions were carefully noncommittal.

"I must tell you both, however, that you have the right to refuse to say anything. I suggest you play it by ear and treat each question on its own merits. If it seems to you that the game is getting a little rough, we'll stop."

He paused again, waiting for comment. None came, and he went on: "Very well, then. The first thing I'd like to talk about is a letter that came some weeks ago for Mrs. Webb from Mr. Greyne in London." He held out the envelope to the Englishman. "Does this look familiar to you?"

"It certainly looks like one of mine," admitted Greyne. "Postmarked the fourth of last month, I see. Yes, that's about the time I wrote to say I was coming over. If

you have the envelope, you probably have the letter. If I could see that, I could soon tell you definitely if it is mine."

"I bet you—" began Webb. He stopped suddenly.

Abbott looked up. "Yes, Mr. Webb?" he asked mildly.

"Oh, never mind!" Webb's tone was surly. "It's just that I don't particularly enjoy listening to a discussion of this man's mash notes to my wife."

Greyme flushed angrily, and began to get up from his chair.

Abbott moved swiftly between them. "Hold it! Let's just slow down a bit. We've got some distance to go yet, and I'd just as soon you two stayed away from each others' throats." He picked up some notes from the mantelpiece and shuffled through them.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we're faced with three possibilities here, each of them equally tenable. If you'll cooperate, I propose to deal with them, one at a time. If I draw some conclusion which doesn't jibe with the facts as you know them, I hope you'll speak up. Fair enough?"

There was no reply. Webb was stretched out in his chair, gazing moodily at the floor. Greyme continued to look noncommittal.

"The first, and most obvious theory is that Mrs. Webb, dis-

tressed by her husband's refusal to agree to a divorce, took her own life."

Webb raised his head and shifted slightly in his chair. He seemed about to speak, apparently thought better of it, and sat back.

"Now, there are a few things that aren't quite right with that idea," said Abbott. "One, for example, is that only Mrs. Webb's fingerprints appear on the gun, although we know from various sources that several people have handled it recently. Then there is the absence of a note, unlikely in a genuine case of suicide. Still another factor is my own failure to believe that she would not simply have left her husband. But these are all ideas, none of them conclusive. I mistrust ideas in police work anyway. It may be that as we get more facts, the suicide theory will be the only one to hold up. We shall have to see."

This time Greyme sat forward in his chair. He appeared to be weighing his words carefully. "I think, Captain, I'd like to reserve comment on that theory until we've heard what you have to say about the other possibilities."

"By all means," said Abbott with a nod. "If Mr. Webb has nothing to add to that, we'll get on with it."

"Mr. Webb tells us that his wife accepted his decision not to give

her a divorce. Suppose, for a moment, that this was not the case. It could be that Mrs. Webb, instead of accepting her husband's decision, told him that she was about to leave him, with or without his consent, divorce or not. Then, it could also be that Mr. Webb, with a fine, aristocratic 'what I have, I hold' approach, shot his wife, rather than allow her to sully his name by running away with another man." Webb stiffened angrily in his chair. Before he could speak, Abbott went on, "I apologize, Mr. Webb, if I'm overly blunt, but we'll get nowhere by pulling punches at this stage. As a matter of fact, here again I'm drawing inferences from possible attitudes, always a dangerous game. This is another theory then, with little factual basis."

"I suspect," said Greyne, with a forced smile, "that we are about to deal with the third possibility, and I have the uncomfortable feeling that I shall be the feature attraction. Carry on, Captain. Let's hear the worst."

"All right, Mr. Greyne. Let's see what we can do. Let's assume that Mr. Webb's account of the quarrel with his wife is substantially correct, and that Mrs. Webb will not face the publicity of a contested divorce action in the courts. After Mr. Webb leaves for his solitary drive, his wife phones you at your

motel. We've learned, by the way, that your bungalow has a direct line, and that your calls don't go through the motel switchboard. You drive up here and try to persuade Mrs. Webb to leave with you. She refuses, saying again that she will not face the consequent disgrace. You lose your temper and, perhaps as a gesture, you pull the gun from the table drawer. The next thing you know, Margaret Webb is dead on the floor. You wipe the gun—you'd have difficulty explaining your fingerprints away—press her fingers on the butt, then leave the gun beside her, as though it had fallen from her hand."

"Plausible, I admit," said Greyne. In spite of his casual manner, it was obvious that he was shaken by Abbott's description. "But, as you yourself have said, pure theory. No facts."

Abbott drew the envelope from his notes. "Well, in this case," he said, "we do have a few facts. One of them is your letter to Margaret Webb."

"Afraid I don't quite take your point, old boy. As I recall, this was a simple letter, telling Margaret of my impending visit." Greyne's face colored. "Oh, I suppose I may have got a bit soppy toward the end, but I hardly think there's anything incriminating in that."

"Let me refresh your memory, Mr. Greyne." Abbott drew the letter from the envelope and began to read. At first there was no reaction from the Englishman, but as Abbott read on, astonishment showed on his face.

"What kind of damn silly nonsense is that?" he cried after Abbott had finished reading. "Do you mean to tell me those are the actual words in that letter? If so, it damned well isn't my letter! Here, let's see it!" He reached out toward Abbott.

"Easy, Mr. Greyne!" Abbott took a step back. "This is the original letter. I don't think I'll take chances with it. I read exactly what was in the letter, and I don't think you should claim a substitution."

"Look, Captain," Greyne appeared to be controlling his voice with an effort, "that isn't my letter! Those last two sections! Even if I'd felt that way, which I didn't, one simply doesn't put that sort of thing on paper! Dammit, man, I could no more spout bilge like that than I could fly!"

Jonathan Webb snorted. "It's pretty obvious to me! That letter sews him up tight. He *has* to disown it."

"Isn't it possible that someone had access to my typewriter?" asked Greyne. In spite of his indignation, he was beginning to

show some concern, look worried.

"Sure it's possible," said Abbott. "Did you bring your machine over with you, Mr. Greyne?"

"Of course not. It's an American machine, but a British model. It can't be used here on this voltage without an adapter."

"Didn't I say it was obvious?" There was a trace of a sneer in Webb's voice.

"Let's try a few more facts," said Abbott. "This time we'll have a demonstration." He called to a policeman who had been waiting just outside the door. "Bring that machine in, will you, Leo?"

The man came into the room carrying a typewriter. He set it carefully on a small table, and plugged the cord into a nearby outlet.

"This look like your typewriter, Mr. Greyne?" asked Abbott.

"Could be its twin." Greyne's voice was puzzled. "Except that mine couldn't run here. Anyway, it's still in London, as far as I know."

"Well, let's try something," said Abbott. He rolled a sheet of paper into the machine, referred to Greynes letter and began to type rapidly but inexpertly, murmuring as he typed.

"—remember that you are infinitely precious to me, comma, ever, comma, Peter.' There we are!" He drew the sheet of paper from the

machine. Holding it beside the original, he walked over to Webb.

Webb jumped to his feet with a hoarse cry. He stopped, stared wildly from Abbott to Greyne. "Say! What kind of a stunt is this?"

"Stunt, Mr. Webb? What do you mean?"

Ignoring Abbott's question, Webb made a dash for the door. Greyne made as if to follow him, but Abbott restrained him.

"He can't get far. There are police all over the place." The Englishman sank into a chair, his expression bewildered.

"Things happened a little too quickly, there, Captain. You were fitting me so neatly into a noose, and then suddenly shifted to Webb. What on earth led you to him?"

Abbott sat down facing Greyne. His face was drawn and grey with weariness.

"Well, you see, I never did buy the idea of suicide, and once I knew you hadn't written that letter, it was just a case of baiting Webb. I took a pretty big gamble here today, but I thought I might

be able to save a few man-hours of work." His lips curled in an expression of distaste. "Mind you, I hate this trickery and scene setting. Good police work would have got him eventually. But this way, I'll keep the papers, and the Brass, off my back."

"You mentioned," said Greyne, "that you knew I hadn't written the letter. How did you know? After all, as far as you're concerned, I could have dished out that kind of tripe."

"Sure you could!" Abbott laughed. "No, it had nothing to do with your literary style. I happened to see an outrageous spelling mistake in a notice on the bulletin-board at Headquarters. I suddenly realized that if you had written that letter, the word 'honorable' would have been written 'honourable'. I just happened, at the right time, to recall that little difference between you British and ourselves."

Greyne sighed deeply.

"Well, all I can say, if you'll pardon a platitude, Captain, is *Vive la différence!*"

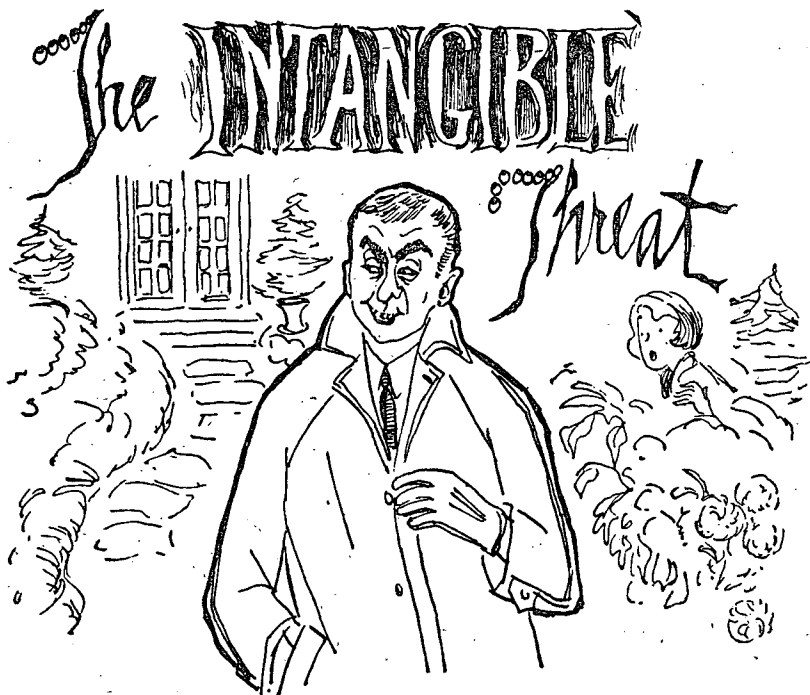


Lacking tangible evidence, the resolution of a problem is often initiated by a premise based on intuitive perception.

LATE one gray and overcast afternoon, some years ago, I was visiting my investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, at seven Autumn Street. Conversation had faltered and presently we sat in silence as a cold

November wind rattled the windows.

Leffing remained hunched in his favorite chair, an expression of brooding melancholy on his face. There were times when the tedium



BY JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

THE INTANGIBLE THREAT

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of mere existence weighed on him heavily. On such occasions he would lapse into silence and unsociability. Though I had learned to endure my friend's black moods, I dreaded them.

With rare exceptions, only two events could scatter the gloom: the promise of an interesting case, or the discovery and acquisition of some treasured bit of Victoriana—a Carder's bowl, a prized paperweight, or even a photograph taken before the turn of the century.

But Leffing's finances had not permitted any recent purchases from the local antique shops, and there had been no case of consequence to engage his attention.

I was about to leave when the doorbell rang. Leffing arose with a listless air and crossed to the entrance hall. I heard an earnest feminine voice; a moment later my friend ushered in an attractive young woman whom he introduced as Miss Eunice Armiston.

Miss Armiston, whom I judged to be in her mid-twenties, had the type of face which used to be described as "a sweet oval"; it was flawlessly symmetrical and delicate, but marred now by a deep frown of worry or apprehension.

When we were seated, she spread her coat across the back of her chair and leaned forward.

"Recently, a friend of mine, Mrs. Julia Newington, mentioned that you had helped her some years ago when a family problem arose which threatened to explode into scandal. She had the highest praise for your discretion and for your dispatch in resolving the difficulty."

Leffing nodded. "I recall the case quite well. The problem required rather delicate handling but I was fortunate enough to settle matters." He glanced at me. "You will not remember the case, Brennan; it took place before your advent." He then turned back towards our lovely visitor. "And now you have a problem, Miss Armiston?"

"I am worried about my aunt," she said. "I did not go to the police because I dread publicity, and also because there is so little really tangible to report. Under the circumstances, you were the first person who came to mind."

"What is the problem then?"

"I am convinced that my aunt's life is in danger!"

Leffing's angular face assumed an expression of interest and expectancy. "From what source, Miss Armiston?"

Our client hesitated briefly and then plunged ahead. "From my cousin, that is, from my aunt's adopted child, Ronald Bladell. He is actually no relation to me at all.

He was the illegitimate son of my aunt's maid. When the maid unexpectedly died, leaving the infant, my aunt felt sorry for him and took out adoption papers. He was always a problem child. Now that he is grown, he preys on my aunt for money. She is quite wealthy, you know—Mrs. Frederick Bladell. Her husband died when he was young, but he left her the Bladell mining properties."

Leffing nodded. "I have heard of the Bladell holdings. Continue, Miss Armiston. What were the exact circumstances which brought you here? Ronald Bladell threatened your aunt?"

Eunice Armiston's frown deepened. "Well, not *directly*. They had a serious quarrel after lunch, but they patched it up and afterwards Ronald was as sweet as honey. That's what worries me, it's so out of character! And then, as he was leaving the house afterwards, I heard him mumbling to himself as he came down the porch steps. I was in the garden but he didn't see me. I couldn't hear what he said very clearly but one phrase did come through. He muttered, 'I'll fix the old witch!' It made my blood run cold. And there was a look of pure hatred, pure evil, on his face as he said it. I am positive he means to harm my aunt!"

"He would benefit by her death?" Leffing inquired.

"Yes, my aunt has remembered him in her will—generously."

Leffing sat without speaking for a few minutes. "While I have great respect for feminine intuition, Miss Armiston," he said finally, "you must realize that we can scarcely take any action merely because of a muttered comment addressed to no one. Perhaps he mumbled, 'I'd like to fix the old witch!' Angry people often mumble threats which are afterwards forgotten. If all of them were successfully prosecuted for making menacing remarks, our jails would not hold them. Can you give us any details of the quarrel? Can you recall specifically what was said?"

Miss Armiston flushed. "I wasn't in the room. I suppose I, well, eavesdropped a bit. My aunt had just recently returned from a Florida vacation. When she refused to give Ronald money over and above his regular allowance—he is twenty-three, Mr. Leffing—he became abusive. He said she had no right to be down in Florida spending money while he was 'slaving away'. Actually, he has an undemanding job as assistant gardener at the local Botanical Experiment Bureau. The hours are short and the work is light, but he doesn't earn enough for liquor, women

and gambling. And my aunt's allowance—generous under the circumstances—even when added to his pay, isn't enough to meet his extravagances either. He accused my aunt of being miserly and selfish. Finally, when he saw that insults had no effect, he apologized and became very contrite. He overdid it so, it was sickening. My aunt must have known it was all a pose, but she was very fond of him at one time and she permitted him to make up."

She paused, biting her lip. "After the argument, he couldn't do enough. He cleaned up some chores which have been neglected because both cook and the yard man have been ill. He carried out trash, burned leaves, ground up a supply of fresh coffee and so on. Well, afterwards, my aunt softened a little in spite of herself. But she didn't give him any money. That was when he left the house muttering that threat, and with that horrible, gloating, venomous look on his face!"

"Possibly," I suggested, "he was gloating because he had managed to gloss over the argument so deftly."

Eunice Armiston shook her head. "No, it wasn't that. I know him too well. I am certain he is planning something malicious, something deadly!"

Leffing frowned. "Did he at any time during the argument hint at anything he might do—in the nature of revenge?"

"No, he didn't."

"And you can think of no specific circumstance or incident which gives solid ground to your apprehension?"

Miss Armiston looked miserable. "Just the argument and that mumbled threat!"

"I fear we have no case, Miss Armiston. As I said before, if people were arrested for muttering threats to themselves, most of us would be imprisoned at one time or another."

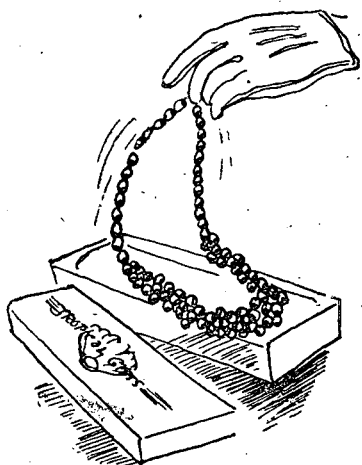
"Well, I *hate* him," she burst out passionately. "The little sneak thief! He's capable of anything! Even murder!"

Anger enhanced Eunice Armiston's attractiveness. Her flushed face, flashing eyes and aura of scornful animation fascinated me.

But all this was lost on Leffing. He pondered her words in his usual clinical fashion. "You use the term 'sneak thief,' Miss Armiston. Is your aunt's adopted son a thief?"

"We have no proof, but in my opinion he is. A number of items have turned up missing after one of his visits. Today after he left, my aunt missed a necklace which she had brought back from Flor-

ida. It was on a table in the room where the argument took place. My aunt shrugged it off, pretending that it was probably mislaid and will turn up later, but I think she knows that Ronald took it.



I've always felt, Mr. Leffing," she added, "that a thief is capable of anything!"

Leffing nodded. "You may be right, Miss Armiston. Was the necklace of much value?"

Our client shook her head. "Oh, no. It was just one of those colorful seed necklaces they make and sell in the South. Its value is negligible. But my aunt was annoyed. I believe she bought the necklace as a present for a little girl who lives next door."

Leffing placed his fingertips together. "Why would Ronald Bladell steal a seed necklace? Surely

he must have known it was virtually valueless."

Miss Armiston shrugged. "I suppose it was just an impulse. Light-fingered people will pick up anything, I understand. It becomes a habit with them."

Leffing frowned. "Miss Armiston, can you describe the necklace in any detail?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Well, since I attached little importance to it, I did not observe it in much detail. But let me see. The beads, or seeds I suppose I should say, were bright red and shiny with black at one end, a sort of tiny black cap. Actually, strung together, they were quite eye-catching."

Abruptly, Leffing arose from his chair. "At what time does your aunt have dinner?"

She gazed up at him in mounting confusion. "At quarter to six. But why do you ask, Mr. Leffing?"

He ignored her question. "You must telephone your aunt at once and insist that dinner be delayed until you have returned. We will accompany you."

Miss Armiston glanced at her watch. "It is too late to telephone now. It is already after five. But why—"

Leffing seemed unaccountably agitated. "Too late, you say? 'After five'? Please explain yourself, Miss

Armiston! Isn't that unusual?"

Eunice Armiston blushed again. "My aunt is—a bit eccentric, I'm afraid. From five until seven the telephone bell is disconnected. My aunt will not be disturbed by telephone calls either just before or after her dinner. It is a great inconvenience to her friends, but she will not change her habits."

Leffing stared at her. "Great heavens!" Then, swiftly, he turned to me. "Brennan, you drove here?"

I nodded.

He started toward the door. "Quickly, then! There is not a moment to lose! Miss Armiston will give us her aunt's address!"

Three minutes later we were in the tangle of five o'clock traffic. When Miss Armiston revealed that her aunt lived in Bethany Woods, I realized every minute would count.

As seems inevitable under urgent circumstances, traffic lights, slow-moving trucks and tortoise-like drivers conspired against us. Leffing remained silent for some time, but as I glanced at his rigid face, I knew he was all but bursting with frantic impatience.

As we approached our fourth red light, he looked quickly along both ways of the intersecting street. "Go through it, Brennan!" he instructed. "Go through it!"

I shot through and began to

make better time. I have only a kaleidoscopic memory of that drive. I know that I went through several more red lights and that as I neared the end of Whalley Avenue, approaching Woodbridge, I saw the flashing lights of a police car in my rear-view mirror. I pressed the accelerator almost to the floor.

The speedometer hit seventy, but the police car gained. Slowing for the curves, I held at about sixty. It was an old car; if the three of us were killed, we wouldn't be able to help Eunice Armiston's aunt.

The police car shot alongside as we neared Bethany. I considered making one final break but thought better of it and pulled over.

By the time the police driver got out of his car, Leffing was already holding out identification which certified that he was legally authorized to act in the capacity of private detective. He spoke rapidly as the officer examined the card.

Suddenly the police driver nodded, hurried back to his car and roared away ahead of us, siren wailing, lights flashing.

Our escort knew the location of the Bladell property. We pulled up behind him in front of a stately Georgian mansion, screened by blue spruce and cedars.

We ran up a curving flagstone path to the porticoed porch. Leffing pressed the bell but Miss Armiston shook her head and fumbled in her handbag. "Disconnect," she explained. "Five to seven."

A moment later she found the key and led us into an entrance hall.

"The dining room?" Leffing inquired.

"Straight ahead," Eunice Armiston told him.

He literally ran past us. We arrived in the dining room just in time to witness a bizarre incident.

A grey-haired matriarch, majestic in her outraged dignity, had risen from her seat at the table, a coffee cup still lifted in one hand.

"What is the explanation of this intrusion, please?" she demanded severely.

In response, Leffing literally leaped across the room and knocked the coffee cup from her hand. The cup crashed to the floor, splattering coffee in every direction.

Mrs. Bladell stared at the shattered cup. Then she lifted her eyes and caught sight of the police car driver. "Officer, arrest this maniac!"

Leffing bowed courteously. "My sincere apologies, Mrs. Bladell. But had you drunk that cup of coffee, it might have been your

last. A chemical analysis, I believe, will reveal abrin, one of the deadliest poisons known!"

Mrs. Bladell looked down at the spilled coffee seeping into her dining room rug. "Abrin? How did it get into my coffee, then? And who are you?"

Leffing introduced himself. "Did you ever find your missing necklace, Mrs. Bladell?"

She shook her head. "No, it hasn't turned up yet. But what on earth?"

"Just this, Mrs. Bladell," Leffing explained, "the necklace, as it was described to me by your niece, consisted of jequirity peas strung together. The jequirity was introduced into Florida where the seeds are used to make bead jewelry of various kinds. The jequirity, or crabs-eye pea, is pretty and colorful, but unfortunately these bright seeds contain abrin, a toxic poison. A single seed contains enough poison to kill an adult."

We all stood staring in astonishment as he continued.

"I fear, Mrs. Bladell," he went on, "that your adopted son, probably as a result of his work at the local Botanical Experiment Bureau, was aware of the toxic content of jequirity seeds. Your niece indicated that Ronald may have stolen the necklace. I did not immediately fathom the implications

of this until I suddenly recalled that Miss Armiston had also mentioned that Ronald had ground up fresh coffee for you early this afternoon. I am convinced the missing necklace, sans string and clasp, disappeared into the coffee grinder, Mrs. Bladell!"

A subsequent analysis of the remaining ground coffee confirmed Leffing's belief. The coffee contained enough abrin to kill twenty people.

As Leffing and I sat discussing the case some nights later, between sips of my friend's choice cognac, I sighed and shook my head. "Your powers continue to confound me," I admitted, "but *must* you be so melodramatic, Leffing?"

"Melodramatic, Brennan? How so?"

"Well, hang it all, did you *have*

to dash that cup out of the old lady's hand? Couldn't you have, well, just told her not to drink it?"

Leffing glanced around his Victorian gaslit livingroom with an air of deep contentment. "My dear Brennan," he replied, settling back in his beloved chair, "one can never take chances with a strong-willed old lady. Had I not dashed the cup from her hand, Mrs. Bladell, in spite of my warning, perhaps *because* of it, might have *per-*versely swallowed the coffee on the spot! I have known these things to happen, believe me!"

I was not convinced. Leffing's tendency to dramatize situations is one of his incurable faults. But I said no more. When one is drinking a friend's twenty-year-old, cask-mellowed cognac, one must not dwell unduly on his foibles.



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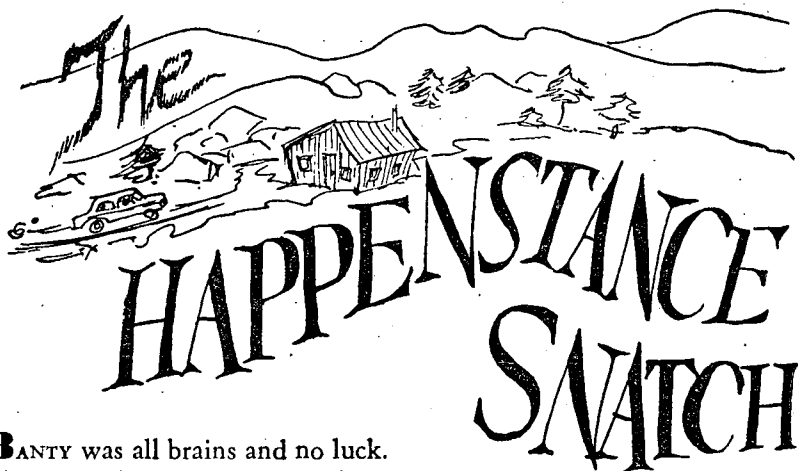
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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

How ironic, if luck is truly infatuated by the efficient, that it is most often besought by those least likely to merit it!



BANTY was all brains and no luck. That was his trouble. You kept thinking he was a guy on his way to somewhere, with all those brains under black curly hair, but he never did have the luck when he needed it. It makes no difference how smart or good-looking you are, you aren't going to attain your objective if you don't have a little luck here and there along the way.

You take the triplets Banty held in a stud game in Kansas City. Anyone would consider it the best kind of luck in the world to hold a hand like that in a game of stud, one in the hole and two showing,

a Novelette by

*Fletcher
Flora*

and anyone with any brains at all would back it up with his grandmother's pension if necessary. But what seems like good luck one

minute may turn out to be bad the next, and it's just about as bad as luck can be, when you consider the consequences, to hold triplets when the guy across the table is holding a straight. About the only way you could make it worse would be to bet your triplets with money you didn't have on the table, or anywhere else, and to have someone like Archie Flowers holding the straight. And Banty did. And Archie was.

I wasn't there, but Banty told me about it. I hadn't seen him around for a day or two, so I went up to his room to see if he was there, and there he was. He hadn't shaved, and he'd been drinking. He'd have been drinking still, except that the bottle was empty and he didn't have enough money to buy one that wasn't.

"What's the matter, Banty? You don't look good."

"Look, stupid," he said, "don't come up here telling me how I look."

He called me stupid lots of times, and some of the times I didn't like it, even though it was true, which I admit, but I never made a big thing of it because we had been pals for a long time, and I kept waiting around for him to start having the luck to go with his brains, and hoping that some of it, when he did, would rub off on

me. Anyhow, I let it pass, not saying anything, and pretty soon he told me about the stud game and losing a bundle on the triplets.

"How much did you lose?" I asked.

"Three grand."

"Where did you get three grand?"

"I didn't have it," he said, "and that's what's got me worried."

"You mean you owe Archie Flowers three grand?"

"Minus about five hundred that was on the table."

"That leaves twenty-five hundred."

"You're a real genius, Carny. You can do arithmetic problems in your head."

"Well, I don't blame you for being worried. How long did Archie give you to raise it?"

"I've got until morning, and morning's coming too soon. You got any money?"

"Not that kind, Banty. You know that."

"I don't mean the kind it would take to pay off Archie. I mean enough to get me out of town."

"Not enough to get you far enough."

"How much is that?"

"Maybe a hundred. Maybe a little less."

"That's better than nothing. What I've got to do is get away

and give this some thought, and you can't think very clearly in the hospital with a broken head, not to mention other bones, and you can't think at all, if bad comes to worse, on a slab in the morgue."

"Where you planning to go?"

"I was thinking about going down to Uncle Oakley's farm."

"Who's Uncle Oakley?"

"Not is. Was. He's dead. He had this farm down in the hills, about a couple hundred miles south, and he left it to my cousin Theodore when he died, but Theodore doesn't live on it and can't sell it, because it's nothing but a shack on forty acres of rock. So there it is with no one home, and it's a place to go until I can think of a better place."

"What I'd like to know is how you plan to raise twenty-five centuries on forty acres of rock."

"Never mind. I'll do the thinking, which is out of your line. Uncle Oakley's farm is safe, if not productive, and that's what's important at the moment. My mind is made up to go there, and now's the time for us to start."

"Us? Did you say us?"

"Certainly I said us. Do you expect me to go off to the hills without even someone to play two-handed stud with? Besides, there will be a certain amount of work to do, and you may be useful."

"Dammit, Banty, I don't want to go down to Uncle Oakley's farm."

"The hell you don't!"

"I don't, and I won't, and that's all there is to it."

"All right, Carny. We've been pals a long time, and I thought we'd be pals forever, but I guess I was wrong. If you won't go, you won't, and I won't either, and I hope I never see you again. You get out of here and don't come back, and don't even bother coming to my funeral if Archie Flowers kills me tomorrow for not paying off the twenty-five hundred I owe him."

Well, how do you feel and what can you do when a pal talks like that? You feel like a heel, that's how, and you do whatever he asks to get him out of the trouble he's in, that's what, and that's how I felt and what I did. Banty packed some things in a bag, and we went over to my place on Troost, a room over a secondhand furniture store, and I packed some things in a bag, and we started out together for Uncle Oakley's farm in Banty's '56 jalopy. While we were driving south out of town, I counted the money I had, and it came to \$98.63. Banty took it and put it in his pocket and said he'd pay me back every cent of it, even though I'd be using my share of it for food and cigarettes and things like that, and

even though he was furnishing the car for the trip besides. It shows how Banty was. He was a free-spender and knew how to treat a pal.

We got out of town on a highway going south, and after a while we came to a service station, and Banty drove in and stopped at the pumps, because the car needed gas. There was a little restaurant attached to the station, a short-order joint for truck drivers, really, and this reminded Banty that he'd been on a bourbon diet for quite a while, until the bourbon ran out, after which he'd been on a diet of nothing at all, nothing being all he could afford after the stud game. We went inside and had hamburgers and pie and coffee, which took maybe half an hour, and when we came out again, the jalopy was gone, but the attendant said he'd only parked it off to one side, out of the drive. He'd parked it in an open space between the station and a place next door, and this place was one of these highway night-clubs, and it wasn't any cheap dump, not by a long shot. It was built of gray stone and glass brick, and there was a formal hedge all around it, and a lot of green plants growing in stone urns along a curved drive coming up to the entrance from the highway. When someone opened the front door,

going in or coming out, I could hear music for a few seconds, a classy jazz combo, and I wished Banty and I could go in there and have a few drinks and some fun, but we didn't have the time or the money, and so we got in the jalopy and started south again for Uncle Oakley's farm.

We drove along pretty fast for about an hour, and then I went to sleep. I must have slept for almost another hour, and when I woke up we were at least a hundred miles down the highway with maybe another hundred to go. Banty was smoking a cigarette and humming a little tune off-key. I listened to the tune for a while, trying to place it, but I kept thinking all the time that I could hear something else, another sound besides the engine and the wind and Banty's humming, but I couldn't decide what it was exactly, or if it was really anything at all besides my imagination. I kept listening and listening and trying to decide what it was and where it came from, if anything from anywhere, and finally I decided it was the sound of snoring in the back seat, which didn't seem likely. I turned my head, though, to see if it possibly was, and damned if it wasn't. The sound was snoring, and it was a girl doing it.

"Banty," I said, "who's that girl

in the back seat? You know her?"

"What's wrong with you?" Banty said. "You crazy or something?"

"Honest," I said. "There's a girl in the back seat, and if you'll only listen you can hear her snore."

Banty listened for a few seconds, his head cocked, and then he pulled over onto the shoulder of the highway and stopped the car and listened for a few seconds longer before twisting around slowly and looking over the back of the seat. I had a wild notion all of a sudden that I was seeing and hearing things that weren't there, he seemed so unconcerned, but then he cursed softly under his breath and pinched the end of his nose, which was a gesture he had when he was puzzled by something, and I knew she was there, all right, and Banty saw her.

"Wake her up and throw her out," he said.

That suited me fine, because I don't mind saying that I'm afraid of strange women who turn up all of a sudden in places where they aren't wanted or expected. I reached over the back of the front seat and shook her a little, but she only turned away on her side and made a little whimpering sound, and drew up her knees like a kid sleeping, clutching them in her arms.

I shook her again, harder, and

said, "Come on, come on, you crazy dame, get out of there!" and pretty soon she came wide awake in an instant and sat up with a jerk. She yawned and rubbed her eyes and began to scratch in her short, tousled hair.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You're in the back seat of my car, that's where you are," Banty said.

"Really? Is that really where I am? Actually in the back seat of your car?"

"That's what I said," Banty said, "and what I want to know is how the devil you got there."

She kept on scratching in her short hair, staring at us with wide eyes, but she didn't seem to be scared or confused or anything like that. In fact, there was a little smile on her face that gave me a notion she thought it was all pretty funny, a good joke on someone, but I couldn't see the joke. What I could see, now that she was sitting up looking at us, was that she was too pretty for her own good, and maybe mine and Banty's, and I wished she would pull down her dress, which was one of these sheaths that keep riding up.

"Well," she said, "I confess I'm a little vague about it, to tell the truth, but I must have simply come out of the Roman Gardens and crawled into your car and gone to

sleep. I can't think of any other way it could have happened, so that must be the way."

"What's the Roman Gardens?" Banty asked. "Is that the place back up the highway with all the hedges and plants and things growing around?"

"That's it. It's a nightclub, and I went there with a friend of mine named Tommy. I drank quite a few martinis, and so did Tommy, and he was getting some unacceptable ideas, and matters were complicated by all the martinis I had drunk, which made it impossible for me to be as clever defensively as I usually am. Finally, as I recall, I went to the powder room and then on outside with the intention of getting some air to clear my head. I was feeling dizzy from the martinis, and I thought I'd sit down for a while until I wasn't dizzy any more, and the back seat of a car seemed like a good place to sit. I got into one which was handy, and which now turns out to be yours, and it would have been all right, of course, except that I apparently went to sleep, and here I am."

"Here you are, and there you go," Banty said. "Get out of here and go back to Tommy."

"How far have we come?"

"About a hundred miles."

"In that case, don't be absurd. A

girl can hardly walk a hundred miles anytime at all, let alone on high heels at night by herself on a highway."

"That's your problem, sister. I didn't invite you go crawl in my car and go to sleep."

"Well, that's no reason why you can't be a gentleman about it. What was done is done, however unfortunate, and you will simply have to take me back where you found me."

"This is where we found you, sister, and this is as far as we take you."

She was looking at Banty with this queer little smile still on her face, as if she was still convinced that she was a good joke on someone, but I could have told her, knowing Banty, that the joke was on her, and it wasn't a very good one, either.

"I promise to make it worth your while if you take me back," she said.

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars."

"Come off. Where would a tramp like you get a grand?"

"You might be surprised. Take me back, I'll give it to you."

"Let me see it."

"You insist upon being absurd, don't you? You must not be very intelligent. I don't have it with me, of course."

"You don't have it anywhere. I may not be very intelligent, sister, but I'm intelligent enough to know when a common little tramp is telling a fat lie. Besides, I happen to need about three grand at the moment, and I couldn't take less for my trouble."

"All right. Three thousand. It makes no difference to me. It isn't my money."

"No? Whose is it?"

"My father's, of course."

"Oh, sure. Your old man's a millionaire, that's what he is."

"That's right. He is."

"What's his name?"

"His name is Arnold Gotlot, and I'm Felicia Gotlot, and we live at Number One, Gotlot Place. It's a private street that belongs to my father, and so it's named after him, and we have the only house on it."

Well, if she was a liar, she was a good one. She said it casually, with the sound of truth, as if it were something she was used to saying, and she couldn't have picked a better old man if she had tried all night, for Arnold Gotlot was a millionaire, sure enough, and everyone knew that much about him, although not much more than that, for he was a seclusive old devil who didn't say much and wasn't seen much and, in fact, made a kind of principle or something out of his privacy.

Banty had begun to pinch the end of his nose now, which might be a good sign or a bad sign, depending on what caused it and what came of it, and he and Felicia Gotlot, if that's who she was, were still staring at each other and seemed to be taking each other's measure. I was on Banty's side in whatever might develop, but I was beginning to have an uneasy feeling that I might not be backing the winner.

"In my opinion," Banty said, "you're a liar."

"In my opinion," she said, "you're a fool."

"Get out," he said.

"If I do, you'll be sorry."

"You're the one who will be sorry if you don't," he said.

"Kidnapping's a serious offense," she said. "Isn't it Federal? Don't they put you in the gas chamber for it?"

Well, now, just like that! Just like explaining something simple to a kid. I felt as if I'd been hit in the belly with a ball bat. It even shook old Banty up. His mouth popped open, and he stopped pinching the end of his nose, and I could tell that he was trying to keep a clear head in spite of being surprised and confused by what she'd suddenly said.

"What do you mean, kidnapping? Who's kidnapped anyone?"



"That depends on whether you take me back to Kansas City," she said. "If you don't, I've been kidnapped, and you'd better believe it."

"You think you can get away with something like that? You just told us you were loaded on gin and went to sleep in the back seat."

"That's what I told *you*. What I tell my father and the police could be something else entirely."

"Banty," I said, "I don't like it. Let's take her back and be done with it."

"Wait a minute. I'm thinking." Banty was pinching the end of his nose again, staring at Felicia Gotlot with odd intensity, and it was apparent that he was thinking hard and fast about something that just come into his head. "I'm beginning to believe this dame. She *is* Felicia Gotlot, all right. Look at that dress. It doesn't look like much, and there isn't much to it, that's for sure, but I'll bet it cost three, four hundred at least, if it cost a penny. Look at that bracelet on her wrist. Those are real diamonds, if I ever saw one. Look at that fur piece. It could be mink, and I'll bet it is."

He started out talking quietly enough, but the more he said, taking inventory, the more his voice changed. It didn't get louder or

faster, nothing like that, but a kind of excitement came into it, something you could feel more than hear. After the inventory, he was silent for quite a while, still staring at her, and that sense of excitement was as real then, when he was silent, as it was before, when he was talking. All of a sudden he reached inside his coat with his right hand, and I thought he was reaching for a cigarette, but he wasn't. He was reaching for a gun, a .38, and he pointed it over the back of the seat at Felicia Gotlot.

"Get up front," he said. "Never mind getting out. Just crawl over."

I said, "You lost your marbles, Banty?"

"Don't ask questions," Banty said. "She wants a kidnapping, she'll get one. A real one." The excitement was so big inside him now that his voice began to shake a little from it, but the gun in his hand was steady. "Don't you get it, Carny? This is the big break. This is what I've been waiting for. This is good luck coming after bad. And it just walked in. Just walked right in and went to sleep. A rich little tramp with a load of gin. It's like fate or something. A man can't turn his back on fate, Carny. A man who did that would never have any luck again, never as long as he lived."

It scared me, honest, hearing

him talk like that, almost as if he were in a kind of spell, and he meant it all, every word of it. I knew it, and Felicia Gotlot knew it.

"I don't want any part of it," I said.

"It doesn't make any difference what you want," he said. "You've got part of it whether you want it or not. This is a snatch, as of right now, and you're in it just as much as I am. You take my advice and play along, Carny, because the stakes are big. Five hundred grand against the chamber. Think of that, Carny. A cool half million. Peanuts to old Gotlot for his precious daughter. Maybe we could make it a million. I'll think about it."

There was no use arguing with him, or trying to get him to be reasonable at all in that queer mood he was so suddenly in, and Felicia Gotlot understood this as well as I did, for she simply crawled over the back of the seat with a big display of nylon that I'd have appreciated more some other time. She settled down between me and Banty, and Banty handed me the .38 and said, "If she makes a sound or a move, belt her over the head with it," and we went on down the highway toward the forty acres of rock that Uncle Oakley had left to Cousin Theodore.

We had the devil of a time find-

ing it in the dark, because it was a long way off the highway on a little gravel road leading into the hills, but we finally found it, after a lot of wrong turns and dead ends, and it was hardly worth finding at all, let alone with so much trouble, for it was nothing but a three-room shack made of rough native lumber that was as gray and weathered against the side of its hill as all the rocks around it. It turned out, though, that there was a good fishing stream on the place, and Cousin Theodore came down here often to fish. As a consequence, the place was stocked with sheets and blankets and cooking utensils and things like that, including a lot of canned goods.

There wasn't any gas or electricity, only kerosene lamps and a wood stove in the kitchen for cooking, and Banty, who had clearly been here before, found some kerosene and lit some lamps while I watched Felicia Gotlot to keep her from getting away, although I don't know where she'd have gone in those dark hills so far from anywhere. The truth is, she didn't seem to have going anywhere in mind at the moment, and I don't blame her.

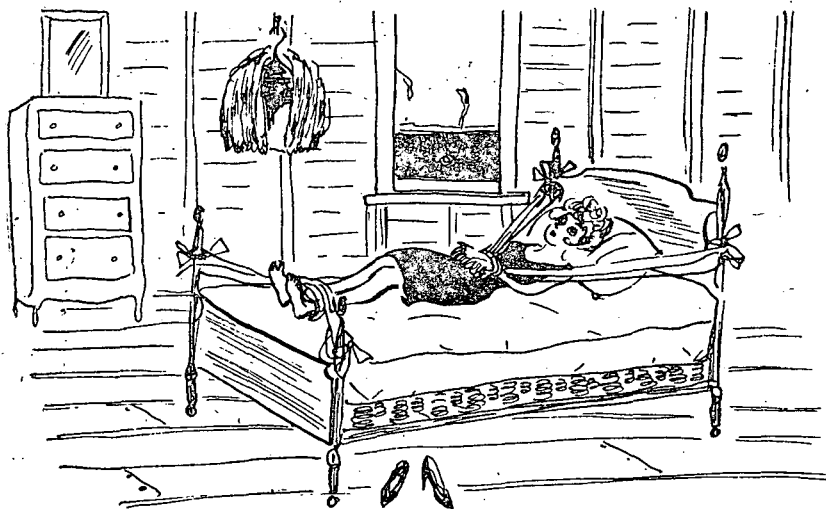
One of the three rooms was a bedroom, with nothing in it but a bed and a chest with a mirror over

it, and we put Felicia Gotlot in there. There was no way of locking her in, which was a problem, and Banty said we'd have to tie her feet and hands.

"It isn't necessary to tie me," she said. "There's nowhere to go, and I wouldn't know which direction it was if there were."

"We'll tie you anyhow, just to be

she could move some and be fairly comfortable, but not enough so she could sit up or reach her feet with her hands by bending. Then Banty went out to the kitchen to build a fire in the stove and make some coffee, but I hung back after he was gone. I don't know why I did, exactly, except that I was feeling kind of bad about tying her to the



safe," Banty said. "It won't hurt you, and it won't be for long, because this job is hot, and I intend to work fast with it."

She kicked off her shoes and lay down on the bed, and we tore a sheet into strips to tie her with. We tied her hands together and her feet together and tied her at both ends to the head and the foot of the bed. We left enough slack so

bed that way, like an animal or something. To tell the truth, I admired her and respected her and wished we weren't doing to her what we were. You had to admire and respect her, I mean. She had plenty of moxie, besides being kidnapped and all, without crying or making a big fuss, and she knew it was her fault for talking too much, letting Banty know who she

was, after getting loaded on gin and crawling into the car and going to sleep. She took the blame, as I figured it, and was quiet and sensible.

"You want some coffee?" I asked.

"No."

"Well, good-night, then," I said.

"Go to hell," she said.

I went out to the kitchen instead, and Banty and I sat down at a table and had some coffee when it was ready.

"When you've had your coffee," Banty said, "you'd better get some sleep because after I leave in the morning you probably won't get much."

"Where you going?"

"To Kansas City to get the money. Half a million. I've decided not to press our luck."

It seemed to me he was already pressing it, but I didn't say so. "You'd better get some sleep yourself," I said.

"I'll catch a few hours after I get back to KC. Then I'll call old Gotlot and arrange for the payoff."

"What if he won't pay?"

"He'll pay. I'll tell him we'll kill his precious daughter if he doesn't."

"What if he won't?"

"Then we'll kill her."

"I hope he pays," I said. I took

a drink of coffee and wished it was whiskey. "What then?"

"I'll drive back here with the money, and we go on south."

"What do we do with Felicia?"

"We leave her here, tied to the bed. We'll send a letter to the police after we leave, telling where she is. She'll get hungry and thirsty waiting, but she won't be hurt any."

"Just a minute. We'll have to wait until we're a long way south before sending the letter, and the postmark will tell which way we're heading."

"There's the difference between you and me, Carny. You're stupid, and I'm not. We'll send the letter from the nearest town. Only we'll send it to the police in New York or Los Angeles or someplace like that, and they'll have to call back to KC. It'll give us plenty of time to get a long way away, and no one but us will know which way it is."

"I have to hand it to you," I said. "You've been doing a lot of thinking, all right."

"I've always been a thinker," he said. "I've just been waiting for my luck."

"I don't like leaving Felicia Gotlot tied to the bed for so long," I said, "and I admit it."

"You'll like the quarter million well enough," he said.

"When will you be back with

it? That pretty green moola."

"Forty to fifty hours at the longest. I'll work fast."

"It's a lot of money. I never thought I'd have so much."

"Get some sleep," he said.

I tried, but I didn't do much good at it. I lay down on an old leather sofa in the livingroom and closed my eyes, but I kept seeing things behind my lids that I didn't want to see, and I kept thinking about how Banty had never had any luck, and wondering if he could possibly have any this time, when we needed it most, and altogether it must have been a couple of hours before I finally went to sleep, which was almost time for me to wake up again. Banty woke me, and I got up, and he was ready to leave. It wasn't light outside yet, but you had the feeling that it would be all of a sudden before long.

"I'm on my way," he said.

"Good luck!"

"Keep an eye on that dame. She's tricky."

"You can count on me," I said.

"I've got to," he said, "and I do."

He went out, and I could hear the jalopy start up and move off down the gravel road toward the highway, the sound of it growing fainter and fainter until it was gone completely, and then I went into the kitchen and lit a kerosene

lamp and made a fire in the wood-burning stove. There was a full pail of spring water that Banty had brought in last night, and I put coffee on to perk and checked the supplies to see what I could find for breakfast. There was no bread or eggs or milk or butter, of course, nothing fresh, but there was a package of ready-mixed pancake flour and some cans of condensed milk. I found a skillet, made some batter with the flour and condensed milk, and fried some pancakes in the skillet that looked as good as you could want, if I do say so myself. By this time the coffee was done, and I went through the livingroom into the bedroom where Felicia Gotlot was, and she was awake.

"You sleep all right?" I asked.

"Wonderful," she said. "It's so comfortable being tied in bed that I'm going to sleep that way all the time from now on."

"You want some breakfast?"

"If that's coffee I smell, I'll have some of that."

"It's coffee, all right. If you promise to behave yourself, I'll untie you and you can come out to the kitchen."

"My behavior, it seems to me, is pretty well determined. It's your behavior that concerns me."

"Don't worry. I won't bother you any."

I untied her, and she swung her legs over the side of the bed, smoothing down the narrow skirt that had slipped up her thighs in the night. After rubbing her wrists for a minute and bending over to rub her ankles afterward, she stood up and went out ahead of me into the kitchen. I poured two cups of coffee and divided the pancakes into two stacks on a pair of tin plates that I found in a cabinet. "I'd like to wash my face and hands," she said.

"Go ahead. There's some water in the pail there."

"Where did it come from? Is there a well or something?"

"Not a well. A spring. There are springs all through these hills. Springs and caves."

"How do you know so much about it?"

"I was born down here. Not far from here."

"Truly? I had the impression you were probably hatched from a billiard ball someplace in KC."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Never mind."

She washed in the cold water, using a pan beside the pail, and dried herself on a towel hanging from a nail in the wall. Then she combed her short hair with her fingers, lacking anything else to do it with, and we sat down at the table and began to drink coffee

and eat pancakes. She ate as if she were hungry, which she probably was, and didn't complain about not having any butter for her pancakes or sugar and real cream for her coffee, nothing like that. She was altogether a remarkable young dame, I've got to admit it, besides being the prettiest one I had ever seen close up in my life, or far away either, for that matter, in spite of being rumpled and tousled with last night still in her face.

She gave me an uneasy feeling, and I didn't like it. It was the kind of feeling you get over some girl when you're a kid, before you're old enough to know better, and it makes you think crazy and act crazy. It's bad in a kid and worse in a man. I wasn't acting crazy yet because I hadn't had time, but I found myself wishing all at once that she was someone besides who she was, Felicia Gotlot, and I was someone besides who I was, a guy called Carny, and that there was a chance of our being something to each other besides what we were and had to be but she wasn't, and I wasn't, and there wasn't. I hoped Banty would hurry back from KC, and meanwhile, I decided, I'd better think less about her and more about the quarter of a million dollars I was going to have all for my own to spend as I pleased.

It had got light outside, and by

the time we'd finished our cakes and coffee it was light inside too, light enough to blow out the kerosene lamp, which I did. We washed up the tin plates and the skillet and went into the livingroom, and it looked like a long day, waiting and waiting for Banty and wondering all the time where he was and what he was doing and how long he would be, and it was made longer and worse by having started so early, and by the problem of what to do with Felicia Gotlot.

I decided not to tie her up again until night, unless she tried something tricky that made it necessary, and I told her this, and she said thanks, she appreciated it. Sarcasm.

"Remember I've got this .38 in my pocket," I said.

"I remember."

"Don't think I won't use it if you make me."

"Would you?"

She found some old magazines and began to leaf through them, and I smoked and watched her for a while. Then I thought I'd have another cup of coffee, and went after it, and she said she'd have another cup too, and so I brought it. I sat down and began to drink my coffee, and she drank hers, but she kept looking at me over her cup with this odd expression.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

"You," she said.

"Well, cut it out."

"Why?"

"I don't like it."

"Do you know what I was thinking? I was thinking about what you might have been like as a kid in these hills."

"I was dirty and ragged and ignorant."

"You must have had a lot of fun."

"Sure I did! My old man was a drunken bum and my old lady was a drunken slob."

"Is that why you left home?"

"Partly."

"What's the other part?"

"Just to get away from these rocks and see if I could find a dollar to carry in my pocket."

"Did you find one?"

"I've been doing all right."

"Now you're going to do even better, aren't you? Now you're going to have a whole quarter of a million dollars to carry in your pocket."

"That's right."

"No, it isn't. That's wrong."

"You think so? Wait and see."

Do you really imagine that fellow you called Banty can pull off something like this?"

"Sure. Why not? Banty's smart."

"I doubt it. Anyhow, he's weak."

He doesn't have anything inside. He's just some curly hair on top of nothing."

"You don't know him, that's all."

"I don't have to know him. All I had to do was look at him and hear him talk. You'll find out. He'll botch the job and squeal on you, and both of you will end up in prison, and maybe in the gas chamber."

"Shut up. If you haven't got anything sensible to say, just keep your mouth shut."

"Take my advice. Get out while you can. You could get away if you left right now."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"It makes no difference to me, really. I just hate to see you get into any more trouble than you're already in. That Banty's bad luck."

"I should tie you in bed and leave you there."

"Have it your own way," she said.

She shrugged and began leafing through another old magazine, and I began to think again about Banty and try to figure when he'd probably be back. He hadn't told me any schedule, of course, because that was something he'd have to work out in KC after he got there, but I figured he'd probably contact Arnold Gotlot tonight, or maybe even this afternoon, since the job was hot. Besides, he wouldn't want to

prolong his chances of running accidentally into Archie Flowers or one of his boys. He'd tell Arnold Gotlot about having Felicia and wanting the half million to give her back alive, and then he'd probably hang up and let Gotlot think about it for a while. Later on, maybe tonight or early tomorrow, he'd call again from another phone and set the time and place exactly for the payoff. I didn't know where the place or when the time would be, naturally, but I knew, knowing Banty, that the place would be one he'd choose carefully and the time would be soon, and it was my bet that it would be tomorrow night. That meant Banty would be back early the next morning at the latest, probably between midnight and daylight.

As I expected, it was a long day and a bad one, and I thought it would never pass, but it did. We ate something from cans about noon, and something else from cans before dark, and between the two times, Felicia Gotlot went into the bedroom and lay down on the bed and had a nap. I was tired and sleepy myself, having started the day so early after a hard night, but I didn't dare go to sleep because of having to watch Felicia Gotlot, to see that she didn't run away, maybe hitting me over the

head or shooting me with my own .38 before running. I made her leave the door to the bedroom open so I could see her lying in there from where I sat, and I played Old Sol ten times with a pack of cards I found, and he beat me every time.

A little while after dark, I was so tired and sleepy I couldn't stand it any longer, and I told her I was going to bed and she'd have to go too.

"Are you going to tie me in bed already?"

"That's right."

"Would you let me sit up by myself if I promise not to do anything you told me not to?"

"No."

"You aren't quite as dumb as I thought you were."

"I'm not dumb enough to think you wouldn't lie to me if it suited you."

"I'm quite an accomplished liar. I have a particular talent for it."

"And that's the truth," I said.

I tied her in bed the same way Banty and I had tied her before. She didn't fight it, or try to talk me out of it any more, but just lay there quietly looking up at me with that odd little smile on her face.

"Enjoy yourself while you can," I said.

"You aren't as dumb as I

thought," she said, "but you're still pretty dumb."

"You may change your mind," I said.

"What makes you so sure Banty's coming back?"

"He'll be back."

"Well," she said, "half a million is twice as much as a quarter million, and I don't see what's to keep him from going north or east or west instead of south."

Then she closed her eyes, still smiling, and I don't mind admitting that I couldn't put what she'd said out of my mind, and I couldn't sleep because of it, tired as I was and much as I needed to. I got up and began smoking cigarettes, but I had to quit after a while because I only had about half a pack left to last me until Banty came back, if he ever did, and I sat there in the dark for almost ten years trying to convince myself that he surely would. Finally I lay down on the sofa again and shut my eyes, but I kept seeing Banty heading any direction but south, and it was after midnight before I went to sleep and began dreaming about the same thing. It was a dirty trick of Felicia Gotlot's to put me deliberately in such a frame of mind, and I hoped she was having as much trouble sleeping as I was, but she said the next morning she hadn't.

I got back at her a little by leaving her tied in bed until the middle of the morning, but then I let her up for coffee, and let her stay up afterward. Things were strained between us, though, and it wasn't until afternoon, after we'd had something to eat out of cans, that she finally said any more to me than was strictly demanded by necessity. Then she said she was sick of staying inside all the time and would like to take a walk.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Oh, come on. We could just walk up the hill to the crest and back. What harm could it do?"

"Well, none, I guess."

The truth was, I wanted to get out of the house myself, and I was glad to go. We walked on up the hill at an angle to the crest, and it was something to see how well she managed to walk among the rocks in her high heels and tight skirt, and she was, as I've said, pretty remarkable at more things than you'd think. There was a fallen tree near the crest, and we sat down to rest on the trunk of the tree. It was mighty nice up there, if you care for rocks and scrub timber, and I could see, glittering in the sunlight at the foot of the hill below the house, the good fishing stream that Cousin Theodore came here to fish in.

"I've made up my mind to tell

you something," Felicia Gotlot said.

"Don't bother," I said.

"I've made up my mind to tell you the truth, and you'd better listen."

"I'll bet it's the truth!"

"You know why I've made up my mind to tell you? Because you're not a really bad fellow, only dumb. It's that bad Banty who makes you do things that get you into trouble, but Banty won't do it any more, because Banty won't be back."

"There you go again, and you may as well quit."

"I don't mean because he'll run away. I just said that to bother you and make you realize how dumb it is to trust someone like that Banty. I mean because the police will get him."

"Not Banty."

"Yes, they will, and I'll tell you why. Do you want me to tell you?"

"Suit yourself."

"The police will get him because when he goes for the pay-off, whenever and wherever it is, Arnold Gotlot will have enough men there to fight a small war."

"No, he won't. Not after Banty tells him what will happen to his precious daughter if he tries any tricks."

"That's what I've been getting around to telling you. Nothing is going to happen to Arnold Gotlot's

daughter, and Arnold Gotlot knows it, because his daughter is at home this minute with a broken leg, where she has been for nearly a week."

"What the hell you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Felicia Gotlot's leg, which is broken. She fell off a horse."

"Oh, sure. And I suppose you're Felicia Gotlot's grandmother or someone like that. Is that it?"

"No one like that at all. My name is Amanda Swanson, and I'm a maid in the Gotlot home. Felicia likes me and humors me, and when I go out at night she lets me wear her clothes and jewelry. When that Banty was so nasty last night, refusing to take me back to Kansas City and all, I lied about being Felicia because I thought it would impress him and make him take me. Then when he got the idea to kidnap me, it was too late to tell the truth, because he wouldn't have believed me. Besides, I didn't like him, and wanted to get him into trouble, which I have, and he deserves every bit of it."

"I don't believe you. You're always telling lies, you said so yourself, and you're lying now."

"I admit I'm a good liar, and I lie when it pleases me, but now it pleases me to tell the truth, and you'd better believe me. I know old

Arnold Gotlot like the palm of my hand, and I know how he hates con men and blackmailers and crooks of all sorts. The minute Banty contacts him, he'll start laying the trap to catch him. He won't let on or say a word about Felicia's being at home; because that would scare Banty off. What he'll do, he'll play along and agree to everything, setting the trap all the while, and then, probably tonight, it'll be the end of Banty, and if you don't get out of here right away, it'll be the end of you too."

I'll say that I was excited, and I almost lost my head. All I wanted to do, all at once, was to start running and keep on running, without ever looking back, until I couldn't run any farther, and I wished I'd never seen or heard of Felicia Gotlot, or Amanda Swanson, whichever she was, or of Banty either. I was sort of crazy for a minute, that's what I was, and I did actually jump up and take a couple of steps downhill, almost on my way, when I suddenly stopped and thought better of it.

"Hold on," I said. "How do I know you weren't telling the truth before, and telling lies now?"

"So far as that goes," she said, "you don't."

"You're Felicia Gotlot, all right. You're just trying to get me to run

away so you can walk somewhere and call Kansas City and get Banty caught."

"Your concern for Banty is touching. Too bad he wouldn't feel the same about you. However, you could prevent my going anywhere by tying me in bed again. It wouldn't matter much to me. The police will be here sometime tonight in my opinion."

"Banty will be here, that's who. He'll be here with half a million dollars, and I'll be right here to get my share of it. Nothing doing, sister. You'd just as well quit lying, because it won't do you any good."

"I was wrong," she said. "You're just as dumb as I thought you were at first. You're simply too dumb to take proper care of yourself."

"You'd better quit calling me names too. I'm getting tired of it. Come on. Let's get back down to the house."

She walked down ahead of me, without saying another word. In the house, she went directly to the bedroom and stayed in there all the rest of the afternoon, until it was time to open some more cans, and afterward she went back and stayed in there alone all evening until I decided it was time to tie her in bed again in case I fell asleep, although I was getting more and more nervous as it got later and later, and didn't feel like

sleeping in spite of being as tired as I can remember ever being.

"So you're really going to wait for Banty," she said.

"That's what I'm going to do."

"Pleasant waiting," she said.

"Wake me up when the police come."

"That will be a couple days after Banty and I are gone," I said. "I hope you don't get too lonesome in the meanwhile."

"It will be an interesting speculation for you," she said. "Maybe it will help to pass the night faster. It ought to be quite exciting as time grows shorter and shorter. Will it be Banty or the police? The police or Banty? A simple thing like that can get into your head and drive you crazy if you don't get it out soon enough."

You can see that she'd done it again. Just like she'd done it last night about Banty running off with the money. She'd put it in my head, and I couldn't get it out. It stayed right there and kept repeating itself over and over again, first one way and then the other, Banty or the police, the police or Banty, and to make matters worse I ran out of cigarettes. I gathered up all the butts I'd left in saucers around the place, and I smoked these, a few drags off each one, but pretty soon they were all gone too, and it was only about ten o'clock

with a long, long time still to wait.

I didn't know exactly how long, of course, and I began trying to guess, and I guessed four hours. There wasn't any reason for guessing four instead of three or five, but it, somehow made me feel better and surer to have a certain time to look forward to. I guessed that Banty would make the contact for the payoff at eleven sharp, which would leave him three hours to get back down here if he hurried, which he sure as hell would, and after eleven I began to try to follow him along the highway in the jalopy, placing him at certain places at certain times. As it turned out I wasn't far wrong, for he was only about fifty miles away in my head when someone suddenly kicked the front door open, and five cops jumped into the room

with their guns out, and every cop was nine feet tall.

Well, that's the way it ended, and it's over, and I'm almost glad. As you can see, Banty was bright but had no luck, and I had no luck and was stupid besides.

Not that Felicia Gotlot, though. She was bright and lucky both, besides being the best liar I ever met. It was simply impossible to know when to believe her, because she told the truth like a lie and a lie like the truth. I don't hold anything against her, though. I liked her, and still do, and I remember that she tried her best to get me out of it before it was too late, which it now is. The prettiest and altogether the most remarkable woman I've ever known was Felicia Gotlot—Amanda Swanson, I mean.



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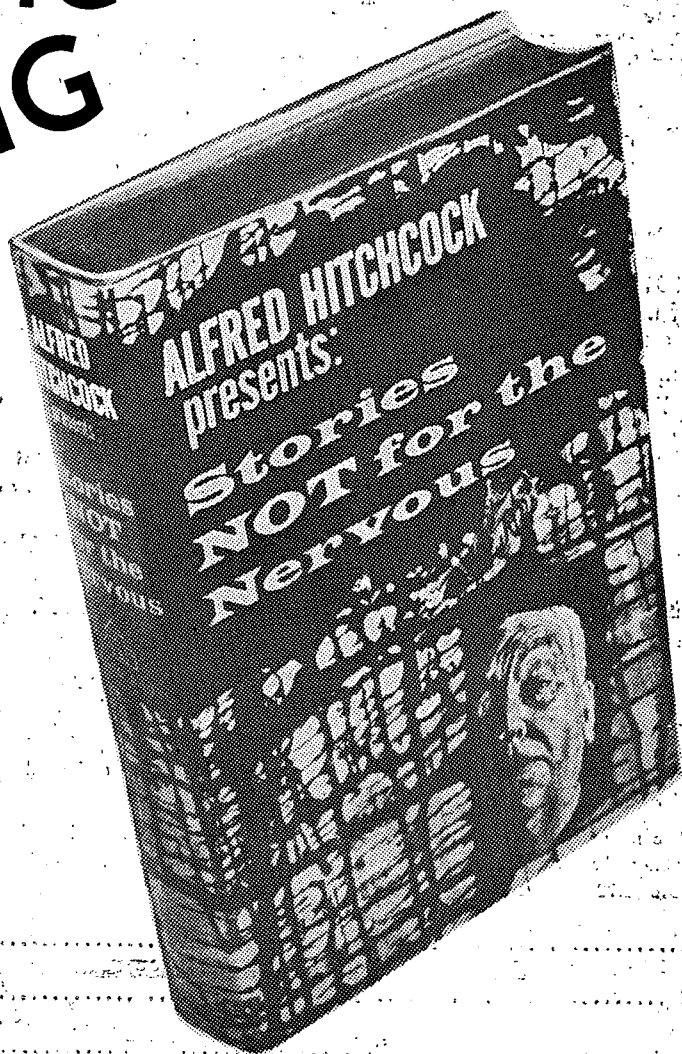
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